

Agreed summary of oral submission to the Victorian Independent Remuneration Tribunal's review of the Members of Parliament (Victoria) Guidelines

The Hon. Kim Wells MP

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Restrictions on using the Electorate Office and Communications Budget (EO&C Budget) for party political communication

- The Members of Parliament (Victoria) Guidelines include rules about what can and cannot be included in communications funded by the EO&C Budget.
- Claims are not permitted for reimbursement of communications material that use a non-recognised party name or non-official parliamentary office title. For example, claims have been rejected for material which includes the terms 'Liberal Nationals Coalition', 'Liberal Nationals' and the 'Federal Liberal Nationals Government'.
- MPs who are members of the government are able to use the EO&C Budget to communicate with their electorate about government initiatives, whereas non-government MPs are unable to use the EO&C Budget to communicate about alternative policies. This limits the ability of the Parliament to hold the executive to account.

Restrictions on using the EO&C Budget to support Shadow Ministerial responsibilities

- The Guidelines appear to restrict Shadow Ministers from using their Electorate Office Budgets to support their Shadow Ministerial responsibilities to communicate with community stakeholders outside of their local electorate.
- The Parliament of Victoria recognises the responsibilities of Shadow Ministers, providing an additional salary payment. Allowing the use of the EO&C Budget to support Shadow Ministers to fulfil these additional responsibilities would support them to perform their parliamentary duties.

Photocopying for local community groups

- There is uncertainty over whether MPs can use the EO&C Budget for photocopying of leaflets or other like material for local community groups.

Bulk mailouts

- Rules requiring a copy of materials distributed in bulk mailouts to be attached to invoices requires clarification.

Support of sponsorship of community groups and other organisations

- MPs are unable to use the EO&C Budget for communication materials indicating support or sponsorship of community groups or sporting clubs, for example, a sign at a sporting club that states 'proudly supported by [name of MP]'.
- MPs are unable to use the EO&C Budget to undertake joint communications with the Country Fire Authority and other community groups.

Websites

- MPs are unable to host documents on their websites which contain a party logo within the document. If this occurs, then the entire website is deemed non-compliant with the Guidelines.

- MPs are unable to claim via the EO&C Budget for the costs of registering 'ghost' domain names. This practice is aimed at ensuring fake websites, with similar names to an MP's official website, are not set up with incorrect information about an MP.

Invoice processes

- There are opportunities to streamline current invoice processing arrangements, which can be cumbersome and opaque.
- The Department of Parliamentary Services could be given more discretion to make 'interim decisions' in circumstances where the Guidelines are unclear as to whether an item can be funded under the EO&C Budget. This interim decision would be made while clarity is sought from the Tribunal in its periodic review of the Guidelines.