

AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL EXCHANGE COUNCIL

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Individual Study Tour Delegation

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Executive Summary

Australian commentators, journalists and advocates for democracy frequently raise concerns about trends in modern American politics and the potential for American political tactics to negatively impact the state of democracy in Australia.

A recent example was former Prime Minister John Hewson writing about the ‘Americanisation’ of Australian politics.¹

Practices in American politics which are commonly cited and considered objectionable include:

- the prevalence of ‘**big money**’ in politics;²
- the rise of third-party groups that organise and redirect ‘**dark money**’ political spending in favour or in opposition to certain parties or candidates;³ and
- partisan local campaigning (especially by third party groups) with the intention to falsely convey the impression of wide grassroots support for a policy or candidate, when not as much local support actually exists – often referred to as ‘**astroturfing**’.⁴

During my visit to the United States, I saw that the above practices are widely-established and they continue to evolve.

Upon learning more about these practices – and how to recognise them – it becomes abundantly clear that the Americanisation of Australian politics is more advanced than many commentators may realise.

An objective assessment reveals two things:

Firstly, the American practices many Australians would deem objectionable have already been deployed in Australia over this past electoral cycle – most successfully by the multimillionaire donors and affiliates of Climate 200 Pty Ltd and by the trade union movement.

Secondly, these objectionable American political practices are being led in Australia by the political left.

I have therefore concluded that concerns about the Americanisation of Australian politics are well-founded.

Reflecting on my interviews and discussions in the United States, I predict that the adoption of these American political practices will likely accelerate in Australia. In part, this is because those who have recently tried it have not been called out for it by the media, and they have been rewarded for it by the voters.

¹ <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2024/09/14/the-americanisation-australia>.

² <https://thedailyaus.com.au/stories/heres-why-us-election-campaigns-are-so-expensive-and-australia-is-a-bit-cheaper/>.

³ <https://theconversation.com/what-is-dark-money-political-spending-and-how-does-it-affect-us-politics-236294>.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/08/what-is-astroturfing>.

Report

The Americanisation of Australian politics: a case in point

A recent case study for the Americanisation of Australian politics involves trade unions, non-government organisations (NGOs) and the left-wing Australia Institute.

In some of my meetings in the United States, political operatives noted every similarities between two recent left-wing campaigns – one in Australia and one in the US – regarding the cause of inflation.

In February 2023, the Australia Institute published a paper claiming that corporate profiteering was the major cause of inflation in Australia.

The paper, titled *Profit-Price Spiral: The Truth Behind Australia's Inflation*,⁵ was promptly shared and boosted online by multiple trade unions and NGOs. It was then reported by some left-leaning journalists who reliably provide a platform for the Australia Institute, before being picked up by mainstream journalists. Thereafter, it was kicked along on social media platforms for months, including through boosted (paid) posts and by influencers (at least some of whom solicit payments for their posts).

Of course, there is nothing necessarily odd about trade unions and NGOs making claims like this in support of their consistently left-activist worldviews, nor leveraging these claims into the media and social media.

What was noteworthy, was how a nearly identical campaign, containing similar misleading claims, had just been released by an American equivalent of the Australia Institute, the Economic Policy Institute, which happens to be closely affiliated with American trade unions.⁶

Similar campaigns were launched by alike organisations in other liberal democracies, including in Canada and the UK.⁷

Equally noteworthy was how eerily similar – sometimes identical – the messages, memes and designs of different unions and NGOs were in this case, and how these campaigns were deployed in the same period of time, given that all the organisations in question are supposedly independent.

⁵ <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Profit-Price-Spiral-Research-Report-WEB.pdf>.

⁶ <https://www.epi.org/blog/corporate-profits-have-contributed-disproportionately-to-inflation-how-should-policymakers-respond/> and <https://www.epi.org/blog/profits-and-price-inflation-are-indeed-linked/>.

⁷ <https://www.ippr.org/media-office/revealed-how-powerful-companies-are-amplifying-inflation-through-their-profit-margins>.



Of course, the claim at the heart of the Australia Institute paper was bunkum and it was quickly dismissed by authorities including the Australian Treasury and the Reserve Bank.⁸

The Australia Institute was urged to “admit their mistake and retract their so-called analysis” following harsh criticism from the nation’s leading economic institutions.

Yet the Australia Institute did not retract its paper – nor did its American counterpart – because its purpose was not to produce robust or fair analysis but rather to advance left-wing political interests.

Why? With inflation setting in, interest rates rising, and household savings running out, it was predictable that voters – in both Australia and the US – would soon be searching for someone to blame. With left-wing, union-linked governments in charge, they would not have wanted to see the debate play out the same way as in previous economic cycles, where a significant amount of public blame was attributed to unions making large pay claims, and excessive government spending and waste. From the perspective of a left-wing government or a trade union with links to that government, or an NGO enjoying the fruits of high-spending governments, the conclusion was the same – it was very important this time to have someone else to blame.

Putting to one side the misinformation in the Australia Institute paper, though, this case is notable in demonstrating clear links between the tactics, messaging and campaigning of left-wing organisations in the United States and here in Australia.

Whenever they appear to be operating in concert with American political interests, the links between campaigns of left-wing organisations in Australia deserve greater scrutiny by the media and voters.

This is particularly so when the NGOs and trade unions involved receive special public benefits such as tax-exemptions, government funding or charity status. Or where the NGOs and trade unions are not required to disclose if big money or dark money donations have flowed their way.

⁸ <https://www.afr.com/policy/economy/australia-institute-urged-to-retract-flawed-profit-inflation-report-20230513-p5d84j> and <https://www.afr.com/rear-window/australia-institute-deaf-to-economists-criticisms-20230528-p5dbxu>

Big money trends

Australian commentators concerned about democracy and the Americanisation of our politics commonly highlight the prevalence of big money in American politics.⁹

Indeed, one of the most remarked upon aspects of US politics is the sheer magnitude of the total dollars raised and spent in campaigns.¹⁰

While the total contributions to US Presidential campaigns attract the most headlines, the increasing cost of local campaigns for House seats also warrants closer attention.

Compared to Australia, the sums involved in key House seat campaigns make elections prohibitively expensive without the support of big money – and that applies to candidates from both sides of politics. The sums involved are exponentially higher in key seats in the US compared to Australia, even when adjusted to reflect a dollars-per-voter measure.

Nonetheless, Australia also faces a measurable rise in big money donations in our political system.

A record-breaking list of big donations has emerged over the past decade in Australia, ranging from Clive Palmer, Mike Cannon-Brookes, Malcolm Turnbull, Graeme Wood and Duncan Turpie, to trade unions, industry groups, union-aligned superannuation funds, class action lawyers, Climate 200 Pty Ltd, and many more.

Some Australian political players like the Greens have attempted to draw a distinction between donations from corporations and donations that are received instead from individuals behind the corporations.¹¹

Greens bank \$3.9m in donations including \$600,000 from Graeme Wood



Tom McLroy

Updated February 1, 2017 – 8.49pm, first published at 9.45am

Save Share A A A

The Greens received more than \$1 million from two big donors last financial year, helping bankroll the party's campaign for the July 2 federal election.

Wotif founder Graeme Wood donated \$600,000 to the party, the largest contribution to the Greens' \$3.9 million in donations and other payments in 2015-16.

Mr Wood, who was [responsible for the largest single political donation in Australian history](#) before Malcolm Turnbull's [\\$1.75 million donation to the Liberal Party last year](#), also gave \$6000 to the Queensland Labor Party.

Reclusive Queensland mathematician, investor and high-end gambler Duncan Turpie continued his large contributions to the Greens, donating \$500,000 to the party before the July 2 election.

Qld Greens defend decision to take money from professional gambler



Tony Moore
January 17, 2024 – 8:02pm

Save Share A A A View all comments

The Queensland Greens, who want Brisbane clubs to give up their poker machines, have accepted almost half a million dollars in donations from a professional poker player.

Since December 2017, reclusive Gold Coast gambler and mathematician Duncan Turpie has donated \$472,088 to the minor party, according to Electoral Commission of Queensland disclosures.



⁹ <https://thedailyaus.com.au/stories/heres-why-us-election-campaigns-are-so-expensive-and-australia-is-a-bit-cheaper/>.

¹⁰ <https://usafacts.org/articles/tracking-2024-election-contributions-and-spending/>.

¹¹ <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/greens-bank-39m-in-donations-including-600000-from-graeme-wood-20170201-gu2qzm.html> and <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/politics/queensland/qld-greens-defend-decision-to-take-money-from-professional-gambler-20240117-p5exv6.html>.

Unfortunately for the Greens, Australians may view any large donations with scepticism, particularly where the donors are linked with vested interests that may derive benefits from changes in government policy.

Separate to the quantum of big money donations in America, is the changing landscape around donation laws and the rise of Political Action Committees (PACs).

Contrary to popular misconception, America does have political donation caps.¹² These currently rest at \$3,300 per person, per candidate. America also has laws requiring the public disclosure of donations.¹³

PACs are organisations in the American political system that receive and redirect donations. Rather than being discouraged, the lawful operation of PACs is explicitly written into the electoral system and tax laws of the United States as a way of ensuring disclosure and transparency.¹⁴

Yet the introduction of donation caps and disclosure laws caps in America has not had the effect most Australians might imagine. Instead of limiting political donations, the reforms have overseen or coincided with an ongoing explosion in the growth of donations and a rapid expansion of the web of entities that receive and redistribute donations.

Interviewees described to me an 'arms race' that is effectively being waged by both sides of politics in America to test the limits of the evolving donation laws and find new or creative ways for political donations to occur.

One prominent example of this arms race is the rise of external entities called Super PACs, which face no limits on donations so long as they can prove that they spend more than 50% of their efforts on causes other than political activities. The reasoning seemed to be that organisations with a substantially non-political raison d'etre did not require the same scrutiny or limitations as those with a political purpose.

Yet, in practice, the line between political expenditure and non-political expenditure can be a fine one. Interviewees described to me how, for example, paying a doorknocker to encourage a voter to support some policy position is likely to be non-political so long as no political party or candidate is mentioned by the doorknocker. Paying the same doorknocker to encourage that same voter to vote for or against a certain candidate (to support the same policy position) is likely to cross the line and be considered political expenditure.

In other words, the mere mention or not of a political candidate or party is often a defining distinction between political and non-political activities.

It is easy to see how, under this approach, a super PAC could structure and classify over half of its activities as non-political, simply by directing the first 51% of its resources toward building an issue up in a community campaign that does not mention political parties or candidates. It could then use the remaining balance of its funds to bring the campaign home by introducing the concept of a hero (or villain) candidate or party who deserves to be supported (or opposed) on the basis of their policy position. Despite spending 100% of its resources on a campaign like this, such a super PAC could still be classified as having a substantially non-political mission.

¹² <https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/candidate-taking-receipts/contribution-limits/>.

¹³ <https://www.fec.gov/introduction-campaign-finance/how-to-research-public-records/individual-contributions/>.

¹⁴ <https://www.fec.gov/press/resources-journalists/political-action-committees-pacs/>.

Inevitably, these Super PACs have become vehicles for corporate money and the uber-wealthy to play in politics. As one interviewee remarked to me, “you need at least a couple of billionaires to play”.

And it is not far-fetched to imagine this same arms race playing out in Australia. For starters, recently introduced disclosure laws and donation caps around Australia draw similar distinctions between political and non-political expenditure.¹⁵

It may surprise many Australians to learn that we have recently witnessed in Australia the creation of new types of entities that receive and redistribute big money political donations. Interviewees remarked upon the curious fact that Climate 200 was established as a proprietary limited (for-profit) corporation under Australian laws, as opposed to being set up as a non-profit, association or political party.¹⁶

Climate 200 Pty Ltd – which has always been at pains to distinguish itself from a political party – was founded to support a group of so-called ‘independent’ candidates who just happened to all identify themselves under a shared label (‘Teals’). They also have shared branding, a shared policy platform, shared media events, shared technology providers behind their websites and fundraising platforms, and shared political opponents (they only opposed centre-right incumbents at the 2022 federal election). Of course, these candidates also shared in the millions of dollars of donations received and redistributed by Climate 200 Pty Ltd.

Not all donors to Climate 200 Pty Ltd are known, but those who are known include billionaires, multimillionaires, and other vested interests who would receive direct benefits from changes in various government policies.

Just like the flaky reasoning behind super PACs in America being considered non-political, there are strong echoes of this same reasoning underpinning Climate 200 Pty Ltd. The question should be asked by the media and the public: are Australian laws for disclosure and transparency keeping up with new models for receiving and redistributing donations, such as the use of an incorporated for-profit business like Climate 200 Pty Ltd?

According to its big money disclosures, Climate 200 Pty Ltd received and redistributed \$13 million in the 2022 Australian federal election campaign.¹⁷

While Climate 200 has asked Australians to focus on its claim that 85% of its reported donations that were valued at \$500 or less, any focus on big money in Australian politics should go straight to the other end of the scale. It is reported that Climate 200 Pty Ltd and its Teal candidates received over \$4.5m from just five big money donors, many of them with significant financial exposure to government policy settings.

Keep in mind that there are always two streams of money here to consider for the purposes of disclosure: the “upstream big money” that flows from donors to an entity, and then the “downstream” big money that flows from the entity to candidates, parties, or other recipients.

In the case of Climate 200 Pty Ltd, it has declared downstream big money that flowed to its Teal candidates. That is a separate question, however, to whether other downstream money flows occurred, for instance to other recipients, or to ends that might be classified in the American system as “non-political” expenditure.

¹⁵ <https://elections.nsw.gov.au/funding-and-disclosure/electoral-expenditure/what-is-electoral-expenditure> and https://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0028/76645/State-fact-sheet-07-Definition-of-electoral-expenditure.pdf.

¹⁶ <https://abr.business.gov.au/ABN/View?id=98632816383>.

¹⁷ <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/the-big-money-behind-the-teals-big-victory-20221106-p5bvxb.html>.

When it comes to upstream big money to Climate 200 Pty Ltd and its Teal candidates, there are concerning instances where they have not complied with disclosure rules pertaining to its incoming donations from big money donors.

One case involves a coal investor whose \$100,000 donation to Teal MP Zali Steggall was split into eight separately listed donations of \$12,500, which just happened to fall beneath the \$13,800 disclosure threshold that applied at that time.¹⁸

Climate warrior Zali Steggall failed to declare six-figure donation from family trust of coal investor



Rob Harris

February 14, 2022 – 5:00am

Save

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A A A

Climate and integrity crusading independent federal MP Zali Steggall failed to disclose a six-figure political donation from the family trust of a multimillionaire coal investor, who is accused of tax fraud, for almost two years, an audit of her campaign financing has found.

An Australian Electoral Commission compliance review into Warringah Independent Ltd's 2018-19 disclosures uncovered that a \$100,000 cheque from The Kinghorn Family Trust, headed by prominent businessman John Kinghorn, had not been made public even though it exceeded the disclosure threshold.



Subsequent media reporting revealed that in addition to sharing branding, policies, donors etc, the Climate 200 backed Teal candidates also shared a financial controller, Damien Hodgkinson, who was alleged to have been behind the donation-splitting situation above.¹⁹ It is also reported that he was the founding director and sole shareholder of Climate 200 Pty Ltd.

Interviewees noted to me how remarkable it was, given some of the above facts, that Climate 200 Pty Ltd and its Teal candidates ran a campaign under the banner of “integrity”.

¹⁸ <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/climate-warrior-zali-steggall-failed-to-declare-six-figure-donation-from-family-trust-of-coal-investor-20220213-p59w0x.html>.

¹⁹ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/the-backroom-player-at-the-heart-of-the-zali-steggall-donations-affair-20220217-p59xaw.html>.

Objectively, the corporation called Climate 200 Pty Ltd was probably the first American Super PAC to be created in Australia.

Through their practices, the Teal 'independents' may have done more than anyone else in recent history to Americanise politics in Australia.

If, like in America, Australia has entered an arms race between our electoral disclosure laws and new types of entities, both attempting to keep ahead of the other, it will be import for lawmakers and the media to ensure that Australian electoral donations laws are not subverted or create cover for billionaires, inherited multimillionaires and other vested interests to influence Australian politics.

The US experience suggests that unless super PACs like Climate 200 Pty Ltd are prevented from subverting the intent of our electoral laws, there will be an increasing risk to the integrity of Australia's political system, and that could potentially allow foreign actors and vested interests to be able to manipulate Australian political outcomes.

Dark money trends

Dark money refers to political contributions received from donors whose identities are not disclosed. Dark money can have a significant influence on elections, particularly when used by “independent expenditure” groups – commonly referred to as super PACs – that are legally permitted to receive and spend an unlimited amount of contributions.²⁰

In meetings with officials and political operatives in the United States, there was increasing concern expressed that dark money was subversively penetrating the American political system.

In addition, there was concern that dark money was being washed from US-based entities to influence the political systems and election outcomes in other countries, including Australia.

For example, according to its annual report, the \$75 million Sunrise Project operation in Australia receives over 10 per cent of its annual budget from its US-based parent entity.²¹ This amounted to \$14.1m in 2022.²² Once transferred, such funding ceases to be considered a foreign funding source and it can then be contributed to Australian-based political activities or political entities. This could include the for-profit Climate 200 Pty Ltd.

A recent report uncovered that an Australian organisation called Smart Voting – which had engaged in directing voters against supporting some candidates in the 2022 election – publicly lied about their financial connections to the Smart Energy Council and Climate 200 Pty Ltd.

While the organisation had claimed “it had “no affiliation with Smart Energy Council”, and that “Simon Holmes à Court is not connected to Smart Voting Pty Ltd”, it was subsequently revealed that the Smart Energy Council donated \$45,000 and Climate 200 Pty Ltd donated \$1.1 million.²³

Once funding has been washed through an Australian-based entity to Climate 200 Pty Ltd and donated to candidates with the express objective of electing certain candidates as Members of Parliament, and based on their own boasts of aiming to hold the balance of power, you have a risk of de facto interference of the Australian Parliament by foreign interests.

In my interviews, there was particular concern expressed that US-based billionaires and vested interests could finance such activities to advance their commercial interests through preferential legislation and regulation at the expense of Australian taxpayers and their standards of living.

Another concern expressed by interviewees, particularly in meetings with think tanks and other political groups, was the recent evidence of American trade unions financing political activities through Australian unions. It was suggested that in addition to securing election outcomes, another aim of such international funding could be the hope of setting legal precedents in Australia that could then be replicated and introduced back into America. The example most often cited was the foreign funding by the US-based Teamsters for the Transport Workers Union in Australia. The Teamsters boast of being “America’s largest, most diverse union” with its origins amongst “freight drivers and warehouse workers”.²⁴

²⁰ <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/d/dark-money.asp>.

²¹ https://sunriseproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/SP_MVSA009-Sunrise-Project-Annual-Report-2022_V7-FA-Low-Res-Spreads.pdf.

²² Ibid, see in particular 2022 income under Finances on page 39.

²³ Di Stefano M (2024) “Simon Holmes a Court and the energy charity shell game” *Australian Financial Review* 23/06/2024. Available at: <https://www.afr.com/rear-window/simon-holmes-a-court-and-the-energy-charity-shell-game-20240624-p5jo9o>.

²⁴ Teamsters Union (2024) “About” *International Brotherhood of Teamsters*. Available at: <https://teamster.org/about/>.

It was suggested to me that the Teamsters union, as with the Transport Workers Union, increasingly has its legitimacy threatened by consumers choosing gig-economy options rather than traditional business models. In response the Teamsters appear to be financing action through the Transport Workers Union to secure law reforms in Australia that limit, constrain or add costs to gig economy options so that these cases can be used as precedent in political and legal arguments, and then replicated in the United States.

In my meetings it was described as increasingly common that American money could finance overseas advocacy and electoral outcomes, not just in Australia.

This is not without precedent. We know it is not just United States-based interests that seek to influence the Australian political system. As was exposed in 2017, former Labor Senator Sam Dastayari was found to be taking undisclosed private financial contributions from entities connected to a foreign government creating the risk of black mail or corruption of foreign governments over influential political figures.²⁵

The growing reach of dark money in America has led to recent investigations and the publication of a book by the Capital Hill Research organisation which reflected:

*“At its helm is Arabella Advisors, an influential philanthropic consulting firm in Washington, D.C., catering to donors like the Rockefeller Family Fund, the Ford Foundation, and George Soros’s Open Society Foundations. The firm belongs to Eric Kessler-Arabella’s founder and chief string-puller – a child of wealth turned environmental activist and Clinton administration staffer who now operates in this highest echelon of Democratic Party politics”.*²⁶

The scale of dark money now manipulating American politics has led to mainstream progressive media raising concern. In a recent review of the Atlantic it raised concern about:

*“the massive progressive dark-money group you’ve never heard of ... the indisputable heavy weight of Democratic dark money”.*²⁷

Similarly, the New York Times reported:

*“an opaque network managed by a Washington consulting firm, Arabella Advisors, that has funnelled hundreds of millions of dollars through a daisy chain of groups supporting Democrats and progressive causes. The system of political financing which often obscures the identities of donors, is known as dark money, and Arabella’s network is a leading vehicle for it on the left”.*²⁸

The sheer magnitude of the dark money donations being received and redistributed through Arabella entities is staggering. In some years it has exceeded US\$1 billion. In my interviews a number of politically-informed persons drew connection between Arabella Advisors LLC and the risk that dark money from the United States may be washed through new or emerging entities in Australia like Climate 200 Pty Ltd or associated entities, with the intention of influencing Australian politics.

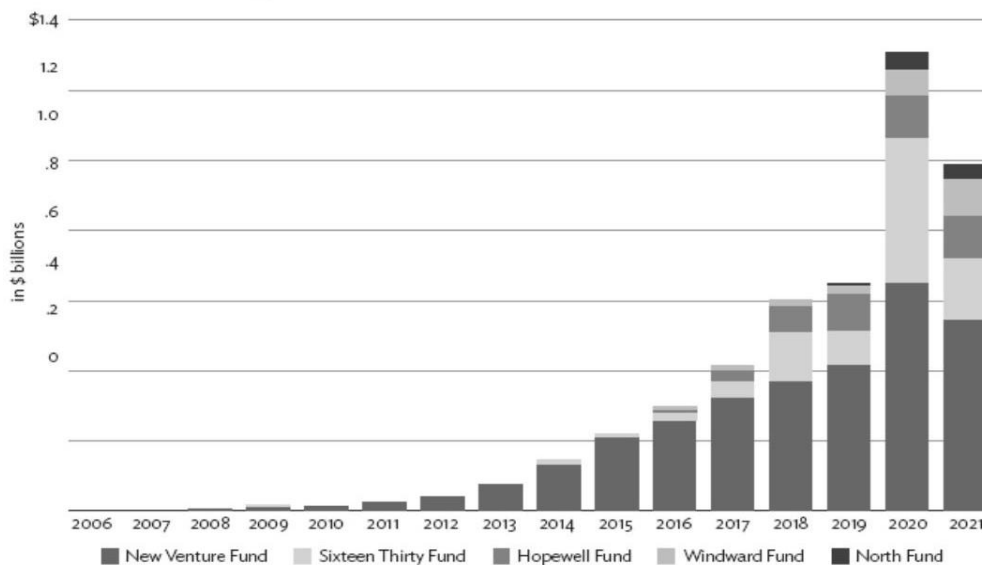
²⁵ Remeikis A (2017) “Sam Dastayari quits as Labor Senator over China connections” *The Guardian* 12/12/2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/dec/12/sam-dastayari-quits-labor-senator-china-connections>.

²⁶ Walter D (2024) *Arabella: The dark money network of leftist billionaires secretly transforming America* Encounter Books New York p15.

²⁷ Green E (2021) “The massive progressive dark-money group you’ve never heard of” *The Atlantic* 2/11/2021. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/11/arabella-advisors-money-democrats/620553/>.

²⁸ Vogel K.P. & Robertson K (2021) “Top Bidder for Tribune Newspaper is an influential liberal donor” *New York Times* 13/04/2021. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/business/media/wyss-tribune-company-buyer.html>.

Graph 1: Total Arabella Entity Expenditures over time ²⁹



One of the other emerging outlets for dark money in America has been the funding of new, highly-partisan sources of news.

In my interviews, there was a general concern about the dispassionate involvement of the media in giving balanced coverage to stories that did not conform to a dominant narrative. For example, stories about corporate backing of Republican candidates were given measurably higher attention by certain elements of the mainstream media, whereas equivalent corporate backing of Democrat candidates was measurably given lower media attention, even when there were explicit conflicts of interest between donations and corrupt decision making that followed.

One of the diagnoses of the shift is that the American left eco-system seems focused on populating the public narrative space with outlets that are highly partisan, but carry a veneer of being legitimate media outlets. They fund, create and utilise these entities to generate stories and coverage to build out to the mainstream media and legitimise their attacks against their political opponents.

An objective analysis of the state of play in Australia suggests that we are seeing increasing evidence of equivalent behaviour here. The New Daily, an industry superannuation funded opinion website, is a clear attempt to shift public debate in favour of the economic power of organised capital and organised labour. Other examples are outlined in the recent public expose of the coordinated green corporate backers of *The Daily Aus*, *The Politics* section of *The Monthly* and other online publications, such as the *Betoota Advocate*.³⁰

Another example, linked to one of the cases explored above, is that social media influencers like Jack Toohey and Punters Politics appear to have a close relationship to the Australia Institute and their eco-system and repeat their union and superannuation industry-funded messages; whether they receive dark money has not been disclosed.

²⁹ Walter D (2024) *Arabella: The dark money network of leftist billionaires secretly transforming America*, Encounter Books, New York, p15.

³⁰ Bonyhady N (2023) "The Betoota Advocate's former publisher in talks to leave the satirical website" Sydney Morning Herald 29/05/2023: <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/the-betoota-advocate-s-former-publisher-in-talks-to-leave-satirical-site-20230526-p5dbk7.html> & Saeed D (2024) "Schwartz Media sells The Politics to former Junkee boss" Crikey 10/01/2024. Available at: <https://www.crikey.com.au/2024/01/10/schwartz-media-sale-the-politics-piers-grove/>.

Concluding remarks

My interviews in the United States have led me to conclude that there is an inevitability about Australia following in the footsteps of American politics, in terms of (i) the evolution of an ecosystem of third party organisations that operate outside of the political parties (ii) the adoption of American political practices that many Australians would consider objectionable, such as the rise of big money, dark money and astroturfing.

One reason for this conclusion is that attempts to restrict or limit donations and other electoral participation in the United States have actually turbocharged the growth and diversity of its third party ecosystem, not to mention the innovation and creativity behind the structures and operations of many of those organisations. As one observer noted to me, “money in politics is like water: it finds a way”. Australia is now faithfully implementing many of the same sort of electoral laws that have led to those outcomes in America.

Another reason is the clear evidence of coordination and funding that is being directed from American political organisations into Australia (and other countries) by the international political left. This cross-pollination of funding and institutional knowledge can only become more prevalent in an online, interconnected world.

My final reasoning is that many of those in Australia that have recently tried it – like the multimillionaire donors to Climate 200 Pty Ltd and the trade unions – have not been called out for it by the media, in fact the opposite: they have been rewarded for it by voters and cheerleading media supporters. The measurable electoral outcomes, and the certainty that sections of the media will be cheerleaders for ‘sides’ rather than ‘principles’, will incentivise a faster uptake of these American political practices here.

Just like in America, whilst big money, dark money and astroturfing practices have so far been mostly led in Australia by the political left, it is predictable that the political right will feel they have no choice but to respond in kind by adopting the same practices, in order to maintain political competitiveness.

For Australian commentators, journalists and advocates for democracy who are concerned about trends in modern American politics and the potential for American political practices to negatively impact the state of democracy in Australia, it is important for them to recognise how advanced the Americanisation of Australian politics already is. Many of the Australian examples and case studies I have referred to above deserve greater investigation and coverage in this context.