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## Unfair taint on an honest bloke

Craig Emerson | May 30, 2009

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**ARE Australian politicians a bunch of greedy rorters? Cleaning moats. Buying chandeliers. Installing homes for ducks on private lakes. These are just some of the outrageous expenses claimed by politicians in a scandal still sweeping the British Isles. The speaker of the House of Commons has resigned in disgrace.**

Banner headlines and television footage beamed into Australian lounge rooms have encouraged Australian tabloids to turn the attention to Australian politicians. They're all the same, right? All blood-sucking leeches. In it for themselves. Gorging themselves at taxpayers' expense.

It was a guaranteed circulation booster when the front page of Sydney's The Daily Telegraph on May 20 blared "Up you for their rent", chronicling the results of a "special investigation" that purportedly exposed 43 Australian federal MPs for buying dwellings in Canberra, funded in part by travel allowances. A 25cm smiling photo of me portrayed the human face of a rorter. The Daily Telegraph expose was replicated in other tabloids across the country.

So successful were these newspapers in tapping into the rich vein of community resentment about politicians that they followed the issue for three successive days with further special investigations, including into politicians availing themselves of free corporate hospitality, with headlines such as "All aboard the gravy train: If it's free, our polliies will be there".

And just to prove that these tabloids are fully plugged into the internet age, readers were invited to go online in these terms: "Fed up with greedy polliies? Vent online at [dailytelegraph.com.au](http://dailytelegraph.com.au)."

Politicians, tabloid readers were informed, had been showered with gifts including vouchers for bathroom improvements. Only well into the story did the Sydney paper reveal that the offending polliie tore up the vouchers, a fact its Melbourne-based cousin the Herald Sun neglected to mention.

Let's be clear about this: if a politician is truly rorting the system, they should be exposed by the media and, if criminal behaviour is involved, the full weight of the justice system should be brought down on the offender.

But is Australia's system of parliamentary entitlements truly comparable with that of the Old Country? By all accounts, those British MPs engaged in rorting were able to book up lots of private expenditures to the taxpayer without any public scrutiny. It was left to them to determine that moats and chandeliers were parliamentary expenses when clearly they were not.

In contrast, the Australian Parliament's system of entitlements was reformed by the Howard government in 1997, following the exposure of a series of rorts that led to the enforced resignation of four Howard government frontbenchers. No longer could MPs stay at a friend's or colleague's place in another city and claim the full travel allowance; only one-third could be claimed. But under the reformed system, Canberra was different. MPs could claim the (somewhat lower) travel allowance regardless of whether they were staying at a hotel or were renting or buying.

This was no dirty little secret, as the tabloids have implied. It was announced with great fanfare as the outcome of Howard's review of entitlements. If the media considered this a rort back in 1997, it should have said so, but it didn't.

In 2007 the media nevertheless sought to expose Malcolm Turnbull for claiming a travel allowance while staying in a Canberra apartment owned by his wife Lucy. Labor never claimed it was a rort, since Turnbull had fully complied with the 1997 reformed guidelines.

Now, two years later, the tabloids are breathlessly trumpeting that they had exposed not one but 43 "greedy" politicians in their special investigation. For doing what? For complying with the reformed system instituted by the Howard government in 1997 of which they were fully aware and that they did

not criticise at the time.

These exposed practices, we were told, had "sparked anger among voters", which was, after all, the object of the papers' exercise.

How did these journalists uncover these secret, sordid practices? Well, by glancing at the documents already under their noses, put there by the parliament itself in the tabling of travel allowance claims and pecuniary interest declarations. The journalists must have been exhausted by such lengthy and intense investigative reporting. They make Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein look lazy by comparison.

Before I go any further, I have been advised by colleagues not to write this piece, as I risk being the target of retaliation by journalists. You, the reader, will be the arbiter of whether the arguments I am putting are sound or are just a self-serving justification of rotting by a greedy politician.

Having been identified as the human face of a rorter, I want to explain my personal circumstances. I separated from my wife in 2002. She moved with our three children to Canberra in 2003, where she had lived during much of the 1980s and where her mother still lived. On most Friday nights I stay over in Canberra to see the kids. It gives my ex-wife a much-needed break and gives me the opportunity to be with our children. I do not claim travel allowance on these Friday nights or on any Saturday nights that I may spend in Canberra. I did claim travel allowance one night when parliament sat through to Saturday morning, and during the 2020 Summit and also when I stayed in Canberra for an interview on the Sunday program early the next day.

That's it, in 10 years as a parliamentarian.

Although I would often go into the office and work on a Saturday afternoon, I did not claim travel allowance on such occasions, since I did not think it was right to do so.

What do the tabloids expect of me? That I should book my kids into a hotel each Friday night over six years so that we can spend some time together? And then they say we should live like normal people so that we can stay intouch.

Although tabloid editors must believe that I went to the trouble of getting a PhD in economics so that I could slip into parliament to rip off taxpayers, my motives were a little higher than that.

I'm upset at being portrayed on the front page as a smiling rorter. Not until I got to Perth that evening was I aware of the story that would run the next day and that I would feature that day and the next on television as the face of a rorter. I got a text message from my press secretary on my arrival in Perth after 8pm eastern time. If I'd had an opportunity to comment it wouldn't have mattered anyway; the story-line was set and my house had already been photographed. If I had been able to comment, it would have been put at the bottom in words to the effect that Emerson denied he had done anything wrong (which all true criminals, cheats and rorters do anyway).

I'm a strong supporter of the media's Right to Know campaign in favour of a free media. It's a campaign for more information to be made available from government to the media and through it to the public. But when politicians put everything into the public domain, as we should, the tabloids nevertheless present the material as the result of a "special investigation", using it to besmirch politicians' reputations and label them rorters.

Believe me, I'd be happier if taxpayers did not fund any of my salary, allowances or living expenses. Taxpayer funding of politicians is used by some sections of the media as a justification for depicting us as cheats, regardless of how assiduous we are in disclosing how we use entitlements.

If instead we were funded by corporations, the tabloids would be rightly squealing that we were in the pockets of private companies, not behaving in the national interest. And if I somehow made the time to earn my own income while being a minister, I would legitimately be accused of not effectively doing the job for which I was elected.

What's the objective of these tabloid special investigations exposing greedy politicians? Obviously it's to boost circulation.

But a consequence is to discourage community leaders and highly qualified professionals such as academics and business executives from pursuing a career in politics. Is that truly in the national interest? Do the tabloids care?

On all policy matters, I roll with any criticism of my views because debate is important in a robust

democracy. But the editors of tabloids obviously cannot conceive of a parliamentarian who may be motivated by a desire to support the underprivileged and give disadvantaged kids a decent chance in life.

The TV cameras have been around to film the house of rorts. My children are upset. I'm upset. Portraying me as an enemy of the very people I'm trying to support is good for the circulation of the tabloids, but maybe I'm just becoming a cynical politician.

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