

Hearings to grapple with Bill of Rights, private gifts

By Danielle Cronin

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Australia will save \$10 million a year if the Federal Government scraps tax deductions for political donations, a Labor MP leading an inquiry into the issue says. Constitutional reform and political donations will be on the agenda in coming days when parliamentary committees hold public hearings at Parliament House. A leading academic argues it is crucial that indigenous Australians, who had suffered the "disastrous" effects of the existing legal situation, are winners under a charter of rights and changes to the Constitution. Labor MP and committee chairman Mark Dreyfus said the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee would convene a "roundtable" to discuss issues such as federal-state relations, citizenship and a Constitution preamble. "The need for reform of the Australian Constitution is a persistent theme in academic, political and public debate, and some good ideas were produced by the governance group at the 2020 Summit last weekend," he said. "The committee is hoping to build on some of these ideas through the roundtable, giving us a clearer idea on areas in which change is feasible in the near future."

One of the participants is Professor of law and director of research with the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology in Sydney, Larissa Behrendt. Professor Behrendt has called for changes both in the Constitution's preamble and body to protect the rights of indigenous Australians. When the framers of Constitution drew it up, they made a very specific decision that rights which ones were recognised and how they were balanced would be determined by the Parliament, she said. "That decision to trust the benevolence of government when it comes to rights has been disastrous for aboriginal people." Professor Behrendt has proposed a "very controversial" charter of rights be enshrined in legislation.

The Electoral Matters Committee will hold a public hearing into tax deductibility for political donations, taking evidence from Treasury and the Democratic Audit of Australia's Associate Professor Graeme Orr. Individuals and companies can currently claim up to \$1500 annually on their tax returns for contributions and gifts to political parties, members and candidates. Committee chairman and Labor MP Daryl Melham said his party's platform was to abolish tax deductions for political donations, which could save up to \$31.4 million over three years. Professor Orr suggested the Government could impose a \$500 cap to encourage smaller donations from the "grassroots". "People still have identification with parties. It can be stronger or weaker depending on whether they think Kevin Rudd is sexy or not," Professor Orr said. "You're trying to find mechanisms to encourage the parties to reach out to people and also in return parties need money especially if they're going to get serious about clamping down on ... possible corrupting large-scale donations. "...It's public subsidy for wealthier people. Not many people can afford \$1500 a year." Mr Melham said it was "double dipping" when political parties received public funding as well as tax-deductible donations. "Do I support tax deductibility of political donations? No. That's what you have public funding for." The committee is expected to report to Parliament before the end of this financial year.