

Tim Costello compares Coalition's foreign donation ban to Putin's crackdown on dissent

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World Vision Australia chief advocate says bill is part of a 'zeitgeist of a silencing and gagging of civil society'

Tim Costello, chief advocate of the aid body World Vision Australia, has compared the Australian government's foreign donations bill to attempts to stifle dissent in Vladimir Putin's Russia.

On Wednesday, representatives from charities including World Vision and Oxfam fronted the joint standing committee on electoral matters to argue against the bill, part of a broad suite of controversial legislation that the government has introduced with the aim of cracking down on foreign influence in Australia.

Charities have previously warned that the bill will impose a huge red tape burden and strangle their attempts to advocate for policy changes, and on Wednesday Costello said the bill was part of a "zeitgeist" of attempts to silence dissent, similar to countries such as Russia and India.

"The spirit and zeitgeist [of the bill] its exactly stacking up with those countries," Costello, a Baptist minister, said. "It's clearly, in my view, [part] of the zeitgeist of a silencing and gagging of civil society. Hearing inconvenient views and characterising those views [as] political campaigning."

Costello said it was a "very serious infringement" on "what we regard as civil society's voice".

The bill applies a broad definition to political expenditure and includes the expression of "any views on an issue that is, or is likely to be, before electors in an election" whether it is during the campaign period or not.

The cost of many charities' advocacy on issues including homelessness, the age pension, low wages, refugees and the environment would be deemed political expenditure, forcing them to register.

The new status of "political campaigner" comes with requirements to keep records to ensure donors of more than \$250 are "allowable donors" - such as Australian citizens or residents - and are not foreign entities.

Misha Coleman, the executive director of the Melbourne Global Health Alliance, warned the provision would cripple charity fundraising by making it onerous for supporters to donate.

"We would certainly need to inform our donors [about the law] and we'd need to get each of them who donated more than \$250 to sign a statutory declaration saying they were an Australian resident [or] citizen," she said.

"I would suggest that there would be many [that] wouldn't do that or just wouldn't respond to emails, and therefore we couldn't accept that money because we couldn't be certain [about its

source],” she said.

On Wednesday the committee heard evidence that thousands of Australian charities were potentially in breach of requirements to declare political expenditure because they are not aware of the breadth of spending covered.

The Electoral Act currently requires declaration of spending over \$10,000 in a financial year on political expenditure which includes “the public expression of views on a political party, a candidate in an election or [a parliamentarian]” and “views on an issue in an election by any means”.

During Thursday’s hearing, the charity representatives - including from Oxfam and Pro Bono Australia - said they believed they were compliant with the act. The representatives also sought to differentiate charity advocacy from overt political spending.

But Liberal party MP Ben Morton pointed to a publicly available Oxfam policy document for the Campaign for Australian Aid which pointed to a \$1.2m donation from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation aimed at “targeting the Australian federal election in 2016 and Australian federal budget in 2017”.

The donation was managed by World Vision Australia, and in disclosures published on Thursday it reported receiving \$46,985 from the Gates foundation. The previous year it declared \$215,500. The charity said the donation was spread over two years and was mostly directed at activities not subject to election donation laws.

But Morton suggested the donation amounted to “foreign influence” on an election campaign and questioned why World Vision or Oxfam couldn’t fund their campaigns with domestic donations.

But the Oxfam chief executive, Helen Szoke, said the campaign had a “complete focus on the issue of overseas aid which is direct to our purpose as a registered charity”.

“Is it appropriate that it’s funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation? We see that as very different to money for a political party where the sole purpose is to actually have people elected to parliament.”

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<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/feb/01/tim-costello-compares-coalitions-foreign-donation-ban-to-putins-crackdown-on-dissent>