

Donation reform recommended

Political parties would need to declare all donations over \$1,000 under a raft of changes recommended by a parliamentary inquiry.

Federal parliament's Electoral Matters Committee has released its report into the funding of political parties and election campaigns, finding Australia's political financing arrangements are in need of reform.

"While there is no evidence that the funding and disclosure system is being abused, the inquiry has provided an opportunity to strengthen and provide more confidence in the system," the report said.

"Transparency and accountability must remain central goals of our financing arrangements."

The committee wants any donations above \$1,000 to be disclosed. At present the current threshold is \$11,900.

It also wants single donations over \$100,000 to be disclosed to the Australian Electoral Commission within 14 days.

The committee has also proposed greater disclosure of political spending, which is currently disclosed as a block sum with no specific details.

A dissenting report from the Coalition members of the committee criticised some of the 30 recommendations, particularly the lowering of the declaration threshold which it said serves the interests of Labor, the Greens and their backers.

"[This] will significantly impact the ability of individuals to give donations to political parties without the potential for intimidation and harassment," it said.

Meanwhile the Greens expressed their disappointment that bans on donations from tobacco and alcohol companies would not be implemented.

"Prohibiting these industries from making political donations would be a first step in combating the corrupting influence of donations in politics," the Greens' report said. •

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DRESSED FOR SUCCESS: Fashion skills helping new migrants

Creativity assists with settlement

New arrivals from war torn countries like Sudan need more help to stay in school or gain meaningful work experience to avoid becoming involved in criminal activity, according to a former teenage refugee.

Nyadol Nyuon, who arrived with her family in Australia in 2005, knows from her own experience that more educational support is needed — especially in regional Australia — to help young people maximise their potential.

She is now an ambassador for The Social Studio in Melbourne which helps mostly African refugees gain hands-on experience in the fashion, retail and hospitality industries.

"A lot of young people from refugee backgrounds struggle when they go to high school, and since young people spend a lot of their time in high school this is an environment where, if more is invested in it, they can get more out of it," Ms Nyuon said.

She told a parliamentary inquiry into multiculturalism that giving more support to young people struggling at school could help them stay engaged and less likely to become involved with gangs and other criminal behaviour.

"So if we invest in schools and the education system we might also be countering some other issues in the community and maybe even stopping other things from happening in the future," she said.

NEWS

Chief executive of The Social Studio, Grace McQuilten said the studio was started as a direct response to a range of settlement issues faced by refugees, including unemployment, isolation and difficulties accessing education and training.

The studio has had success in retaining 90 per cent of its students with a range of strategies such as providing them with access to education and assistance with employment opportunities in retail, hospitality and clothing production. This creates a sense of social inclusion and community engagement through their interaction with customers and other members of the public.

Dr McQuilten said the studio's fashion focus helps. "The most obvious is our focus on creativity through fashion and design, and our flexible training delivery where students access TAFE level training, all of which occurs in a supportive setting at The Social Studio," she said.

"A number of programs are attached to the enterprise to ensure students can access support for issues that impact on their ability to participate, including driving tuition, financial counselling, legal advice, referrals for housing, medical needs and counselling."

Dr McQuilten cited a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission study which supported Ms Nyuon's views on the need for greater educational support for newly arrived refugees.

The study of African Australians found the settlement experience is made difficult by a lack of flexibility at education and training facilities to meet the needs of refugee students. It also highlighted the negative attitudes by some teachers and trainers to the abilities of their refugee students, and their difficulties with the curriculum due to a lack of formal education.

The study found younger refugees can lack confidence in English, which creates significant anxiety and feelings of embarrassment on the part of students and can result in increased absences or dropping out.

"We advocate for increased support systems for refugee students in primary and secondary schools, along with alternative educational programs and vocational training for students who

discontinue schooling," Dr McQuilten said.

"Supportive workplace based training and work experience programs greatly enhance the employability of newly arrived migrants from refugee backgrounds. We have found that with increased confidence, self-esteem and English language skills young people form the building blocks for subsequent employment."

Ms Nyuon told MPs at the hearing that when it comes to community awareness of multiculturalism, she thinks more has to be done from within communities such as her own Sudanese community.

"We need to do more to reach out to the mainstream Australian community," she said. "Also, more needs to be done by government officials in making sure that the idea of multiculturalism does not look like something that the ethnic community or people who look ethnic do and the rest sort of watch. Maybe we as a community are not demonstrating very well how multiculturalism benefits our society."

"If we put more emphasis on that, maybe people could see that it is part of an Australian identity, not something that belongs to certain people."

Ms Nyuon highlighted the media's role in how certain communities are being perceived in Australia.

"Particularly the Sudanese communities we deal with have had very bad media coverage — the notions of Sudanese gangs, which is really disproportionate to what is happening in the community."

"It does not assist in the process of settlement, it does not assist in making better communities; it just makes communities scared. We become scared of each other because we are made to feel like our neighbour is a bad person who may attack us."

"That is another thing that needs to be combated. More action needs to be taken. More and more young people feel that if they try to reach out for an Australian identity, it is almost as though they are being told 'You're not Australian enough in some ways'." •

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GETTY IMAGES

THE DOCTOR IS OUT: *Concerns over mobile medics*

FLY-IN MEDICINE SECOND BEST

Rural health advocates have urged federal MPs to ensure the work of local health professionals is not undermined with the use of fly-in fly-out medical staff.

Concerns about the provision of rural health services have been highlighted by the National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA) to the House of Representatives Regional Australia Committee's inquiry into fly-in fly-out (FIFO) and drive-in drive-out (DIDO) workers.

NRHA told the committee policies and programs are needed to effectively balance the use of temporary staff and permanent workers in providing the best care possible to patients.

Executive director Gordon Gregory said feedback received from rural communities is that the use of FIFO health services is a "necessary second best".

"For the people of rural Australia, FIFO and DIDO services are part of a necessary compromise between the tyranny of distance and the justified expectation of [people's] access to services," he said.

The NRHA emphasised in its submission to the inquiry that despite the potential for some problems, FIFO workers make a significant contribution