

Making Australian politics transparent – and how you can help

Christopher Knouse and Nick Evershed – *The Guardian* – 17 September 2018

Here are the nine best tools you can use to help us improve the accountability of your elected representatives

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There's a well-worn adage used by champions of government transparency. Sunlight, it is said, is always the best disinfectant.

Transparency, openness, and an engaged citizenry rightly put fear into government. It deters malfeasance and encourages integrity.

Your role in this equation has never been more important. Trust in government is falling, perceived corruption is worryingly high, and investigative journalism is being cut to the bone.

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That's why Guardian Australia is launching the Transparency Project, a one-stop-shop for those who want to hold their politicians to account.

We've gathered together the most powerful online integrity tools available. Some we've created ourselves. Others were made by external advocates of integrity: citizens, not-for-profits, fellow journalists, and minor parties.

The goal is simple. Combining your efforts, these tools, and the Guardian's investigative reporting, we aim to shine a light on the hidden corners of [Australian politics](#).

So, what are you waiting for? It's time to dive in.

1. [The Disclosure Bot](#)

Pecuniary interest registers allow us to monitor the private interests of politicians and alert us to gifts they receive. The documents tell us when a politician has a financial stake in a company or is a member of an organisation. It could be a shareholding in Telstra or BHP, for example, or membership of the local RSL. The pecuniary interests register is frustrating to monitor. It's hard to tell when changes have been made, and the documents are not searchable. This tool, developed by Guardian Australia's Nick Evershed, allows you to keep abreast of changes as they happen. It monitors changes to the pecuniary interests register and sends out an alert when something is added or deleted. It also tells you when a political party or donor amends the way they've reported a donation.

2. Burn the Register

The disclosure bot solves one problem with the pecuniary interests by alerting us to changes. Burn the Register aims to solve the second: the lack of searchability. Pecuniary interests are typically filled out by politicians in pen, often in illegible handwriting. The files are typically uploaded as PDFs. Imagine manually searching through the thousands of pages of documents for hundreds of politicians. It's an absolute nightmare. Thankfully, the ABC's Jackson Gothe-Snape, supported by Guardian Australia's Nick Evershed and the West Australian's federal political editor, Sarah Martin, have embarked on a huge transcription project. They've crowdsourced transcribers to help convert the pecuniary interest registers into a searchable archive. At last count, 7,182 pages had been transcribed and 3,967 uploaded.

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3. Democracy for Sale

Democracy for Sale is by far the best way to investigate donations to Australia's major political parties. It's a comprehensive, searchable database of all the donations that have been disclosed to authorities. The data is drawn from the Australian Electoral Commission. Developed by the Greens, Democracy for Sale aggregates financial disclosure data from every financial year for the past two decades, primarily sourcing its data from party returns. The tool makes it infinitely easier to search, visualise, and compare donations. You can see how donations have increased or decreased over time, or how an individual donor has split their money between parties.

4. Love Me Tender

Private contractors go to great lengths to win lucrative government contracts. The public, however, sees only a glimpse of the tender process that decides which contract goes to who.

The government uploads limited detail on each contract it awards, generally giving a value, a summary of the work, telling us whether it was an open or closed field of potential vendors, and ultimately telling us who the winning bidder was. Love Me Tender takes all this information and shapes it into something usable. You can use this tool to look at how many contracts a firm has won over time, how much they were worth, and from which departments. At last count, it was displaying some 825,073 contracts worth close to \$650bn. You can visualise your results, create email alerts, and share and export the data. It's a powerful tool, created by Daniel McNamara, a data analyst and computer science expert.

5. They Vote for You

“Forget what politicians say. What truly matters is what they do.”

That's the tagline for this useful tool, which shows you how various federal MPs have voted on legislation. You can search by individual MP or senator, or by issue. It's powerful in its simplicity. Finding out who has voted for what piece of policy can be deceptively difficult. You typically have to wade through complex procedure and jargon. This tool strips all that away. It's a product of the non-partisan and not-for-profit Open Australia Foundation.

6. Open Australia

The same group built the Open Australia website, a collection of searchable Hansard, voting patterns, parliamentary debates, and various goings-on in parliament.

7. ParlEx

How are politicians spending your money on their expenses? Are they flying interstate for a friend's party on your dime? Or using their photocopying allowance to boost their own personal campaigns? Expenses scandals have brought down many a minister. But trawling through the PDFs published by the Department of Finance is hard work. ParlEx has helped reduce the effort, by creating a searchable parliamentary expenses database. It's in beta stage and the software it uses to convert the PDFs to searchable text is not perfect. It also doesn't yet show overseas travel, family travel costs, office facilities, office administrative costs, or telecommunications.

But it's still a hugely useful tool for helping to navigate the spending habits of federal politicians.

[Top Nationals pair hold senior roles at big-business lobby firms](#)

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8. Right to Know and 9. consolidated disclosure logs

These two tools are all about freedom of information requests. That is, they're about requests for government documents that are not otherwise public. *Right to Know* is a powerful website that brings together freedom of information requests to 2,672 government authorities. You can see what FOI requests have been made, where they're up to, and what the result has been. If the document is released, you'll find it here. It's another valuable project from the Open Australia Foundation.

The consolidated disclosure logs fulfil a similar function. Many government departments, when they released documents under freedom of information, will also publish the material on their websites. When they do this, they'll publish on their disclosure log. Each government agency has its own log. This tool brings the disparate logs together, so you can see everything that has been released.

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