

## Developers singled out in corruption debate

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THE good news is that ICAC commissioner Jerrold Cripps QC says that he has not identified major corruption issues throughout the NSW planning sector.

The bad news is that we still haven't got a consensus on how to finally remove any perception of political corruption.

The political system has come a long way in the past 20 years. Back then, political donations were made behind closed doors. The secrecy bred a public fear that donors might be given favourable treatment.

Today, political donations are all on the public record. The information is readily accessible on the internet.

Of course, this transparency has led to a new perception problem. Companies who have made donations to political groups, along with charities and community organisations, have found themselves criticised when they benefit from a government decision.

Similarly, councillors and state and federal politicians alike have been forced to deny wrongdoing, even when they make the simplest of decisions.

ICAC has had a good go at finding ways to reduce the risk of corruption in the planning approval process. But ICAC's proposals do not go far enough.

The commission says an applicant should be required to declare a political donation when their matter is being considered by a minister. But who really believes this will dispel any perception of corruption?

The commission says that councillors whose campaigns have accepted donations should exclude themselves more often. But what happens if only a handful of councillors are left to make major decisions?

The best solution is far more radical than the tinkering at the edges proposed by ICAC. There should be a total ban on all donations, from anyone, to all political parties in local, state and federal elections.

The corruption risks identified by ICAC also apply in almost every area of government decision-making. Government approvals are crucial to much of our state's commerce and industry. For example, governments issue casino licences, grant mining leases, award tenders, accredit energy companies, approve training schemes and the list goes on.

The best way to avoid any improper perception when government does any of these things is to ban political donations outright for everyone. This includes mining companies, petrol producers, tobacco companies, the timber industry, the gun lobby and environmental campaigners. It's not fair or rational to single out developers and planners with a special set of rules.

A total ban would boost community confidence in the political system. The fear by many in the community that the political process has been corrupted will finally end.

Instead, political parties should be financed by their own members and a public funding formula.

Integrity in our state's planning system is important. But reforms should also apply to all areas of government decision-making.

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