

Scandals spark call for a code of conduct

C.T 3/5/12

SETTING STANDARDS

By Peter Jean

Federal politicians have been urged to subject themselves to a code of conduct that sets a new international benchmark for self-regulation by a Parliament.

As the political controversies involving Speaker Peter Slipper and Dobell MP Craig Thomson continue, the Senate standing committee on senators' interests is considering options for a code of conduct for senators.

The report could be tabled in Parliament as early as next week and will be considered by the government before it proceeds with a plan to introduce a parliamentary integrity commissioner.

In a submission to the committee, Australian National University professor of public policy John Uhr said the federal Parliament was one of the few national parliamentary bodies without a code of conduct.

"I think that public confidence in the integrity of Parliament requires that something now be done to articulate standards of official conduct that the public can reasonably expect of their elected representatives," Professor Uhr said.

"The practical question is how best to do this."

Professor Uhr recommended that the proposed senate code include an office of investigation along the line of a standards commissioner. The office would be appointed with the approval of the Senate and empowered to provide advice and carry out investigations. It would report to a Senate standards committee.

Professor Uhr said Australia needed to learn from the experiences of other countries. "Parliament can



INTEGRITY: ANU professor of public policy John Uhr says politicians should be held to account.

learn from the experience of others and 'leap-frog' over existing practice in other parliaments and innovate, with the aim of establishing new international benchmarks for parliamentary self-regulation."

Professor Uhr said the code of practice should set standards for senators who served as ministers.

"The Senate owes it to its executive members explicit statement of the parliamentary standards it expects of them in their new role," he said.

Professor Uhr believed the Senate should regulate itself instead of calling in an external watchdog.

A spokeswoman for Prime Minister Julia Gillard said the government would consider the report from the Senate committee before delivering on a promise to introduce a parliamentary standards commissioner.

A House of Representatives committee report last year found that if a code was adopted, there would be value in appointing an independent parliamentary integrity commission.

A draft code of conduct developed by the House of Representatives committee included five key principles, including "loyalty to the nation and regard for its law and integrity".

"Members must at all times act honestly, strive to maintain the public trust placed in them, and advance the common good of the people of Australia," the draft code said.

"Members must ensure that their personal conduct is consistent with the dignity of the Parliament."