

2 June 2004

## Media release

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# Government Gags Community Voice

Ninety per cent of charitable and community organisations in Australia believe the Federal Government is determined to gag their right to free speech according to a leading public interest think tank.

The finding was made in a survey conducted by The Australia Institute for a study of non-government organisations and Australian democracy. The report, titled *Silencing Dissent*, has been written by Sarah Maddison, Richard Denniss and Clive Hamilton.

Releasing the study today, Institute Executive Director Dr Clive Hamilton said: "Responses from the 290 organisations which took part in the survey indicate that community groups reliant on government funding are experiencing unprecedented levels of intimidation, particularly from the Howard Government. The message is strong and clear - don't bite the hand that feeds you."

Dr Hamilton said the crudest example of Government efforts to silence critics was Treasurer Costello's proposal to disqualify any charity that engaged in advocacy.

"This draconian proposal was withdrawn but its intent has permeated the Government," Dr Hamilton said. "Survey respondents identified a variety of tactics, including bullying, being used to warn NGOs that they question the Government at their peril.

"NGOs represent the disadvantaged and unprotected. Silencing them robs the most vulnerable groups in our society of a voice."

Asked whether dissenting voices are valued by the Government as part of a robust democracy, 92 per cent of survey respondents disagreed.

"NGOs are an essential component of a healthy and robust democracy," Dr Hamilton said. "Attempts to silence their criticisms and stifle their right to public comment will seriously diminish our democratic processes."

*The Institute's report can be read under What's New on its website - [www.tai.org.au](http://www.tai.org.au)*

**Please note the Institute's new telephone number - (02) 6125 1270**

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