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Questions over ad campaign

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Western Power Sale ...Colin Barnett.....Mike Nahan.....Mark mMcGowan....Ben Wyatt
Illustration: Don Lindsay

Here's a conundrum.

Can you trust the veracity of a “public information campaign” promulgated by a government which previously said it would never launch it?

That is the question facing WA voters as they consume online, radio, print and television ads encouraging them to support the proposed sale of Western Power — a message we are paying \$275,000 for the privilege of receiving.

The Government's decision to bill taxpayers for the campaign rather than the Liberal and National Parties is festering as a sleeper political issue less than three months from a State election which will turn, in part, on the contentious privatisation.

Integrity is important in this debate because not only is Colin Barnett asking us to believe his previous concerns about the security and reliability of a privately controlled energy grid no longer apply, he is also asking us to forget his previous stance on government advertising.

Publicly funded advertising has long been a thorny political issue in every jurisdiction but, put simply, it is reasonable to bill taxpayers for messages about their duties, rights and policy changes affecting them, while political parties should fund ads designed to gain popular support for their election platform.

Or to quote the relevant Premier's circular to the public sector on the topic: "Government generally has the obligation to raise awareness of a planned or impending initiative, encourage usage of or familiarity with government products or services, and encourage social cohesion, civic pride, community spirit, tolerance or assist in the achievement of a widely supported public policy outcome."

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