



Right royal wheels falling off

Lindsay Tanner

ONCE in a while, something happens that tells you a lot about a government's priorities.

You get a glimpse of what they're really on about.

Last week in Senate committee hearings Labor uncovered an amazing story.

A North Sydney man building an ornate horse-drawn carriage as a private gift to the Queen wrote to John Howard asking for financial assistance.

Jim Frecklington took it to Cabinet for approval.

The Government gave \$250,000 in December.

The coach is spectacular, the work of a dedicated craftsman. It's encrusted in gold and diamonds, and it's got ducted heating.

The story of how \$250,000 of your taxes helped to pay for it is not quite so spectacular.

Mr Frecklington sent in a few pages outlining the project, which was already well under way. Nobody went to look at it or speak to him. No further details were sought.

No one asked who else was contributing. No one else got the chance to apply for the money. No announcement was made. The Government just handed over \$250,000.

The coach is a private gift, and isn't connected with any

official celebration such as the Queen's 80th birthday.

What on earth is going on?

Some bloke decides to make a nice present for the Queen, writes to the Government, and they flick him a cool \$250,000.

Maybe we could just write this off as a little royalist indulgence. After all, John Howard is a passionate monarchist. And \$250,000 is a very small part of

the total federal Budget.

Unfortunately for the hard-working families whose taxes paid for this, it's not unusual.

The Government's giving \$15 million to fund a Melbourne Cricket Club sports museum. It's spending \$1 million to send a Donald Bradman memorabilia collection on a tour of India. It's spending \$900,000 to persuade migrant kids to take up surf life-saving.

It's doling out money in marginal seats all around the country, like giving \$250,000 to a West Australian couple setting up a caravan park.

When John Howard won in 1996 he slashed government spending and sacked lots of public servants.

Over the past few years, with revenue pouring in from the

minerals boom, he's taken his hands off the reins.

The public service is almost back to 1996 levels, the proportion of highly paid fat cats has doubled, and over \$350 million a year is going on consultants.

Now he's in indulgence mode. Royal carriages, sports museums, cricket memorabilia. He's just been shamed into footing the bill for diverting his plane for a few days' holiday in Broome last month.

His Government is paying for Alexander Downer to get pay TV movie channels at home.

While all this is happening, the big challenges facing our nation are being ignored.

The Government acts only when public pressure becomes overwhelming. And then it

usually cobbles together a half-baked plan with no details and a huge price tag.

John Howard's \$10 billion water plan has a one-page financial statement.

No one knows how much will be spent each year, or who will be in charge of town water supplies and farm planning decisions.

The plan wasn't even considered by Cabinet, unlike the decision to fund the Queen's carriage.

When governments take your money to be used for the common good, you're entitled to expect they'll use it wisely. While no one benefits from all government spending, your taxes shouldn't be frittered away on rubbish.

OVERNMENTS should spend your money on things that genuinely benefit our community.

So if you're facing enormous HECS debts or crippling dental bills or soaring transport costs, think about the royal carriages, sports museums and memorabilia tours your taxes are paying for.

John Howard might have been a miser when he was first elected, but in recent years he's totally lost the plot.

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Coach class: taxpayers pay.