

## Tony Abbott lines up double-dissolution election over workplace relations

Bill Shorten challenged Tony Abbott to a town hall debate on workplace relations, rather than "hiding behind" the "low-rent" Royal Commission into trade unions.

AFR, [Phillip Coorey](#) and [Patrick Durkin, July 13 2015](#)

The Abbott government plans to give itself the option of calling a double-dissolution election based on trade union corruption when Parliament resumes in mid-August.

[Banking on its Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption inflicting reputational damage on Labor leader Bill Shorten](#), the government will use the resumption of Parliament to put two bills back before the Senate that seek to curb union excess.

The bills would restore the powers of the Australian Building and Construction Commission, which were diluted by the previous Labor government, and subject corrupt officials of unions and employers' groups to the same penalties that apply to corrupt business executives.

The government, which wants the option of an early election, has no meaningful trigger for calling a double-dissolution election, which it must hold if it wants to go to the polls before mid-July next year. If the bills on the ABCC and registered organisations are rejected by the Senate again, both would become triggers.

As Mr Shorten mounted his strongest attack yet on the Royal Commission by calling it a "[low-rent inquiry](#)" set up to do the government's "political dirty work", Tony Abbott spent the weekend equating the work of the commission with the two bills.

"What will best help the people of Australia is restoring honesty and good governance to the trade union movement and that's why we have got a bill before the Senate – the Registered Organisations Commission Bill – to bring to the union movement the same high standards of governance which have always been expected and required of companies," he told a party function in Brisbane. "We have also got legislation before the Parliament to ensure that there is a strong, tough cop on the beat in the construction industry. We need the Australian Building and Construction Commission back, and if the Labor Party wants to demonstrate that it has learnt the lessons of the rorts, rackets and rip-offs now being exposed by this Royal Commission, it will pass this legislation."

### Shorten's credibility questioned

On Sunday, Employment Minister Eric Abetz said Mr Shorten should announce at this month's ALP national conference Labor's support for the bills, which, he said, were "designed to stamp out the sort of corruption and scandal being unearthed by the Royal Commission on a daily basis".

A government spokesman said both bills had been prioritised for Senate debate when Parliament returns on August 10.

Last Thursday, royal commissioner Dyson Heydon [questioned Mr Shorten's credibility as a witness](#), accusing the Labor leader of giving non-responsive answers to sustained questioning about a deal that saw building company Thiess John Holland pay \$300,000 to his former union, the Australian Workers' Union.

Mr Shorten admitted he had only recently disclosed to the Australian Electoral Commission a corporate gift of about \$40,000 in the form of a campaign manager for the 2007 election at which he entered Parliament.

On Sunday, shadow agriculture minister Joel Fitzgibbon, a key agitator in Labor's contemporary leadership dramas, backed Mr Shorten, saying he may not have much "razzle-dazzle", but he did have "excellent political and public policy instincts". "Razzle-dazzle is important to some people," Mr Fitzgibbon said. "I'd much rather work with a leader without so much razzle-dazzle but [who] understands the Australian people, understands good public policy and has good political instincts, and he has all of those things."

PM challenged to debate

On Sunday, Mr Shorten challenged Mr Abbott to a town hall debate on workplace relations, rather than "hiding behind" the "low-rent" Royal Commission into trade unions to do his "political dirty work" in the lead-up to the election.

Mr Shorten could be recalled to appear before the commission this year, including by his own lawyers to give him a right of reply, but he said he had answered hundreds of questions and Mr Abbott should have enough courage to debate him in public.

"I answered over 900 questions in Tony Abbott's Royal Commission," Mr Shorten said. "I'm happy to talk about workplace relations. I do say this though – it is \$80 million spent to smear its political opponents, and I say if Mr Abbott has the courage of his convictions, he shouldn't be hiding behind a Royal Commission to do his political dirty work. "Have a debate with me, Mr Abbott, in the Parliament or any town hall in Australia about workplace relations. "I'll back up 25 years of improving people's job security, of real wage increases – I don't recall Mr Abbott ever negotiating a wage rise for anyone other than the barristers he is paying at the Royal Commission."

Senator Abetz found himself accusing Labor of dirty politics when Mr Fitzgibbon claimed the former legal firm of Senator Abetz in Hobart was paid \$17 million to work with the Royal Commission. "This is just another example of Labor's ugly smear campaign which is designed to divert attention from the litany of corruption and scandal being exposed by the Royal Commission," Senator Abetz said in a statement on Sunday.

"In recent days, Bill Shorten has sent out his attack dogs Brendan O'Connor, Sam Dastyari and Kim Carr to besmirch the credibility of the Royal Commission and the credibility of Justice Heydon."