

## **Bill Shorten's Labor leadership at a crossroads**

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The Sunday Age has written forcefully about the role of unions in safeguarding the rights of Australian workers. We have stated unequivocally that unions exist for the benefit of their members, and that "the only welfare with which the leaders of a union should be concerned is that of those whom they represent".

The ongoing Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption may indeed be a witch-hunt, as it has been branded by commentators on both sides of politics, but its chief target last week, Opposition Leader and former Australian Workers' Union secretary Bill Shorten, has emerged from his appearances before the commission with his reputation blemished, although not destroyed.

Indeed, commissioner Dyson Heydon called into question Mr Shorten's credibility as a witness.

At the heart of questioning faced by Mr Shorten are a range of allegations claiming conflicts of interest over informal side deals struck with employers that benefited the AWU to the tune of millions of dollars while he was secretary.

The first day of the commission heard Mr Shorten had been supplied a campaign manager for his 2007 run at the seat of Maribyrnong. Labour hire firm Unibilt was said to have contributed about \$40,000, and the AWU added about \$12,000. These donations were not declared until last week, eight years after being made.

He was also questioned over a 2004 workplace agreement with employer Cleanevent that appears to have allowed below-award payments for low-paid cleaners and a cut in conditions.

Mr Shorten has denied any conflict, but in so doing appears to have laid bare the kind of unbridled ambition that dictates doing whatever it takes to win, ignoring questions of rectitude or ethical behaviour. Perhaps such backroom accords, sealed with a wink and a handshake, may take on the appearance of being proper in the context of a business arrangement – the end justifies the means – but as Mr Shorten told the commission, "I seek to offer myself as the alternative prime minister of Australia", and as such he must conform to higher personal standards.

We believe that what has emerged from the royal commission is that Mr Shorten used poor judgment in some of the deals negotiated while he led the AWU, but there has been no evidence tendered of corruption or wrongdoing on his part. To some extent it may have seemed his political ambitions took precedence over the needs of his union members.

In his time as Opposition Leader, Mr Shorten has borrowed liberally from the Tony Abbott playbook, generally taking negative, pugilistic positions on government matters, without offering meaningful alternatives. If he is to emerge from his current travails with his leadership intact, he must explain clearly and precisely what he stands for.

In his appearances before the royal commission, Mr Shorten has left questions unanswered. It is the unfortunate nature of politics that while such holes remain, they will be filled by rumour, innuendo and capricious sniping, effectively rendering him impotent as an opposition leader.

There are crucial matters of national import facing Australia now and in the months ahead, from the economy to national security, international relations, questions of probity regarding political fundraising, marriage equality and much more.

There are perhaps 18 months until the next election. If Mr Shorten is to lead Labor into the contest, he needs to demonstrate that he is a person of vision, able to articulate formal, far-reaching policies that espouse values that resonate with the electorate.

His Labor Party leadership is at a crossroads.