

Mates defend Bill Shorten's skeletons

Andrew Bolt, Herald Sun, July 13, 2015

IT'S the cover-up that kills you in politics, and defending Bill Shorten is killing Labor. Tragically, the Labor leader is trashing the reputation of the colleagues obliged to defend dodgy deals he made as head of the Australian Workers' Union.

This became shockingly obvious to me when I saw even Gary Gray trying to defend a personal donation Shorten took from a boss whose workers his union was meant to be representing. I know Gray, Labor's former national secretary. We were mates and worked together in Darwin on Labor's 1984 federal election campaign. He later gave me a job on Labor's 1987 campaign, too. Gosh, we loved fighting the Liberals, stopping at nothing to win every vote — that is, nothing short of breaking the law or shaming Labor or ourselves.

Because here's the thing. Gray is as straight as a die. He is so decent and reasonable that, despite his talent, Shorten has given him no better job than shadow minister for Northern Australia. Yet there was Gray on the ABC's 7.30 trying to salvage Shorten's reputation from the wreckage of his testimony to the royal commission into union corruption. This was after the first of Shorten's two scarifying days in the witness box, when it was revealed he'd got a \$40,000 donation from the boss of workers his union was representing in wage negotiations — a donation to pay for a full-time director of Shorten's campaign to get himself elected to Parliament.

It was a donation the workers were never told about. In fact, it was kept so secret that the donor first disguised Shorten's campaign director as a "research officer" of his labour-hire company. Nor was this donation declared to the Australian Electoral Commission, as required by law.

Gray, like several ABC and Fairfax journalists, pretended the real issue here was not Shorten accepting a donation that presented an outrageous conflict of interest. (What did Unibilt expect in return?) No, Gray brushed it off as Shorten merely forgetting paperwork for the AEC, as often happens: "The party here has made a mistake and it's been corrected in the process of the last week, as have such disclosures for ... just about every political party."

Oh, dear. It hurt to see a man I respect — a man of honour — defend what he should condemn, and so make himself look bad.

This is the damage Shorten is doing by forcing Labor and the unions to defend him. He is making his behaviour seem not just acceptable to them but common among union officials. He is trashing their brand. In fact, the evidence against Shorten became so damning that almost no one in Labor now actually defends the specifics.

We heard Shorten agree he probably made just an "oral" agreement with ACI Glass to hand the union \$480,000 after striking a workplace deal.

We heard Shorten struck another deal with Theiss John Holland that saved it millions, and led to the company giving the union \$110,000 a year for three years.

Shorten admitted he probably asked for the money, but denies knowing anything about fake invoices the AWU then sent John Holland — invoices for ads in the union magazine that never appeared, for union research into back injuries that was never done, and for workplace training the company itself provided.

Then there were other deals Shorten negotiated or approved that traded away award conditions with the union then getting donations from those employers. Shorten insists he never exchanged favours for these donations and says his union won great pay deals, but this is red hot.

For unions and Labor MPs not to say so inevitably invites suspicions that they also make such deals with bosses, privately enriching themselves or their organisations while purporting to negotiate for their members. Or voters.

I suspect even Shorten's fiercest supporters fear this, because rather than defending his deals they are smearing royal commissioner Dyson Heydon, a former High Court judge with an impeccable reputation for integrity. Shorten himself portrayed Heydon as merely a Liberal stooge: "He has got a job to do. I get that. It's Tony Abbott's royal commission."

Shorten spear-carrier Kim Carr also attacked Heydon's commission as a political show trial: "These are all the hallmarks of a totalitarian regime trying to put its political opponents on trial in a process which is not even a court, it's a political inquisition."

How tawdry — and probably unlawful, given insulting a royal commission is a crime punishable with jail.

Frankly, I expect little better from the likes of Carr. But from Gary Gray? You, too, defending Shorten? Wearing his mud?

What is Shorten doing to you guys?