

Bill Shorten Cuba jaunt could be illegal under planned changes to law



Billionaire Richard Pratt bought a Bombardier Global Express corporate jet in 2002. Wolter Peeters



AFR, [Aaron Patrick, 11-12 Feb 2017](#)

Gifts from businesses to union leaders like a holiday taken by Labor leader Bill Shorten to Cuba on billionaire Richard Pratt's jet would be outlawed in coming months under a plan by Employment Minister Michaelia Cash. Ms Cash said the trip, taken when Mr Shorten was secretary of the Australian Workers' Union, was a conflict of interest because the Labor leader had approved wage agreements with Visy Industries, which is owned by the Pratt family and employed several hundred AWU members when he was a union leader.

Mr Shorten became friends with the cardboard-making billionaire through his relationship with Deborah Beale, his first wife and Mr Pratt's god daughter, and [went on a holiday](#) to Easter Island, Cuba and Buenos Aires with the Pratt family, according a friend and Jeanne Pratt, the late Mr Pratt's wife. "Bill Shorten personally signed multiple workplace deals with Visy and should come clean about how he dealt with this conflict of interest, whether he disclosed it to his AWU members, and whether he received any other benefits from anyone associated with Visy," Ms Cash said in an email.

(Photo) Jeanne and Richard Pratt at their home Raheen in Melbourne where they hosted an engagement party for Bill Shorten and his first wife, Deborah Beale. Simon O'Dwyer

"Any union leader who accepts tens of thousands of dollars worth of personal benefits from an employer who employs their members is placing themselves in a highly compromising position. "Benefits provided by an employer to a union official clearly have the potential to have a corrupting influence."

Plane upgrade

The timing of the holiday is unclear. Mr Shorten became Victorian secretary of the AWU in 1998, and added the national secretary's job in 2001. He met Ms Beale in 1999 and quickly married. Childless, they divorced the year after he became a politician in 2007. In 2002 Mr Pratt swapped his Gulfstream IV, which was nicknamed the Visybird, for a 13-seater Bombardier Global Express, The Australian Financial Review reported at the time. The Bombardier has a longer range, flies faster and quieter and has more headroom than the G4, the paper said.

(Photo) "Bill Shorten was considered a "member of the family" the wife the late Richard Pratt, Jeanne, said.

The Heydon royal commission into unions last year recommended that what it called the "corrupting benefits" of payments from companies to unions be outlawed. The [inquiry identified four separate cases](#) where the AWU received payments that may have been corrupt between 2003 and 2010. The findings, where were referred to police, led to a demotion for Mr Shorten's protegee and successor at the Victorian division, Cesar Melhem, in the Victorian Parliament, where he is now a Labor MP.

Greater disclosure

While Mr Shorten was not accused of accepting money, the Coalition government plans to introduce a law covering gifts such as free travel and housing renovations "reasonably soon" and require greater disclosure of gifts to union officials, a government spokesman said. It is unclear how the law would work if the union leader had a family-like relationship with the employer.

"Bill was married to the daughter of our closest friends Julian and Felicity Beale and he was like a member of our family," Mrs Pratt said in an email.

Mr Shorten declined to comment. The current secretary of Victorian division of the AWU, Ben Davis, said that he wouldn't accept holiday travel from Mr Pratt's son, Anthony, who now runs Visy Industries. "No, because Anthony Pratt is no friend of the union movement," he said.

When Mr Pratt died in 2009 he was one of the richest men in Australia. His son is a big donor to the Liberal Party, according to Mr Davis.

The shadow minister for employment and workplace relations, Brendan O'Connor, said: "The Government is so lazy, divided and incompetent all they can do is hurl abuse and that's why we've seen no proposed legislation presented for the Opposition to respond to."