

## THE SPEAKER AND PARLIAMENTARY TRAVEL EXPENSES

Abalinx Peter Adamis 3 August 2015



Well what can we the public make of all of this data that is now entering our personal space in our homes via the radio, internet and television? Do we care is the question and if we do what can we the public do about it?

As Australians we have always prided ourselves upon doing the right thing, giving a bloke a fair go and not kicking them when they are down.

Having said this, we abhor thievery and corruption at the highest level of power because we expect them to set the example. Once we find out that our lawmakers have gone beyond the limits of fair play and good governance, we maul them and bring them down. Bronwyn Bishop in this case has reached the pinnacle of her political career and it is unfortunate that she now has stepped down as speaker and resigned. Paul Sheehan's article below provides a good insight into the alleged "rorts of parliamentary travel expenses" and is well worth reading.

I spoke with a number of friends who better understand the politics behind the scenes that I ever will and this is what two of them they have to say: Giuseppe De Simone, one of nature's gentlemen and a political strategist of the first degree gave me his point of view regarding the current political fiasco surrounding the role of speaker and parliamentary privileges.

"I can remember in June 1997 having an ALP Senator and a Liberal Member telling me about the way a backbench parliamentarian could justify any trip anywhere in Australia on their parliamentary entitlement which was unlimited first class air travel for parliamentary business. At any time given the breadth and complexity of the business dealt with by Parliament, there was always a piece of legislation or regulation change or parliamentary enquiry which required the parliamentarian to exercise their judgment on an issue of environmental or industry or indigenous policy".

Giuseppe went on to say that "a flight to Cairns to visit Port Douglas could be justified as research in relation to the Great Barrier Reef and a trip to Broome or Darwin as research on Indigenous affairs. All that was needed was a short file note in a diary to indicate that the parliamentarian had consulted with unnamed members of the public at the location."

However having said the above, Giuseppe, felt that "as backbenchers had limited accommodation allowances outside of Canberra, overnight or longer stays would be usually at their expense if they wanted to conduct more detailed research. No such limitation applied to those fortunate enough (chairs of committees, members of the executive including the outer ministry and parliamentary secretaries, whips and assistants, leaders and deputy leaders of the government or opposition in each chamber etc) to have an unlimited accommodation entitlement for parliamentary business."

**Language is important.** The culture engendered by the use of the word "entitlement" is prone to corruption with fiddling at the edges to maximize personal benefit at the expense of the payer. Payment or reimbursement of properly incurred work related expenses is the usual standard in business. Anything extra is packaged up as a declared fringe benefit within the overall remuneration paid. If politicians are fair dinkum, there is no need to wait for an extensive inquiry to make some simple changes.

Public scrutiny is the best guardian of proper conduct. Each House of Parliament can pass a resolution requesting/directing the Department of Finance to publish online each and every expense claim made on the account of a Parliamentarian immediately it is lodged and require that the parliamentary business being undertaken be specified in sufficient detail to enable it to be identified. Every request for a direct benefit - such as the booking of a flight - should be published immediately upon the booking or payment being made with the same details required.

Summarising up his points of view, Giuseppe advised that if an expense was paid without the necessary justification being lodged by the Parliamentarian, the Department of Finance would deduct the cost from the salary payment to the Member or Senator until the report was filed. The Executive arm should agree to adopt the same level of transparency. State Parliamentarians and Local Councillors should do likewise. Recalcitrants will be exposed for their hypocrisy.

Peter Vlahos, former Mayor of the City of Monash is also of the belief that a change in the Speaker was inevitable and that suitable safeguards need to be in place to ensure that our lawmakers did not go beyond given parameters to ensure the public had faith in the system and instructions. When asked as to who would make a suitable speaker, Peter Vlahos who had met Phillip Ruddock in 1998 said that Phillip Ruddock was an accomplished minister, seasoned parliamentarian and would dignify the office of Speaker of the House of Representatives. Peter Vlahos is of the opinion that the Liberals should put him forward as Ms Bishop's successor!

Other Liberals when approached privately agreed that although the Speaker had to go to ensure that parliamentary procedures and processes were above criticism could not identify a suitable replacement. Some felt that with the Speaker resigning, it may weaken Tony Abbott's position on the front bench and possibly cause another spill to occur. However despite what the public opinion polls indicate Tony Abbott in the months since the last spill has made ground and is in a far stronger position.

It is the author's opinion only and he welcomes any subjective and constructive criticism in saying that the most suitable person to take on the role of the speaker is the current Foreign Minister Julie Bishop if that was at all possible. The Foreign Minister has all the credentials, credibility and political staying power and respect of both sides of politics to wield the "big stick" as some would put it.

The other is the senior Victorian Liberal, Kevin Andrews who is currently the Defence Minister doing a magnificent job in his current role and was instrumental in welding together a strong, vibrant and resourceful team of advisers around him. Kevin Andrews would be a good choice and one that would hold him in good stead until he decides it's time for him to retire from politics. The question is and forgives the authors ignorance of parliamentary procedures, but is it all possible for this to occur and/or should the alternative candidate such as Australia's elder statesman, Phillip Ruddock take on the role of Speaker.

We live in interesting times and as such, Australia requires a steady hand at the helm especially in today's world of uncertainty, global fiscal conflicts and disagreements amongst nations and the growing menace of terrorism on a domestic and international level. May the games begin!



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## **BISHOP'S END GAME: THE UNTENABLE BECAME UNBEARABLE, FROM A TO Z**

August 2, 2015 Paul Sheehan

Bronwyn Bishop had to go because her saga had become the government's saga. The Speaker's excesses had become the political property of the Prime Minister. Her immovability had become his failure. Her position was untenable and undignified. It had grown to cover an entire alphabet of failure.

A. Abbott, Tony. Bishop was corroding the credibility of the Prime Minister. She was damaging his leadership. The party's alternative leaders, Scott Morrison, Malcolm Turnbull and Julie Bishop, had all made it clear Bishop has to go.

B. Budget austerity. Bishop's sense of entitled grandiosity had crashed a truck, or helicopter, or limousine, through the government's message of budget austerity.

C. Caucus. Support for Bishop had evaporated within the Liberal parliamentary caucus.

D. Distraction. Bishop's refusal to step down was causing a monumental distraction from the substance of opportunity for the government, given Labor's failure to propose

any serious measures to curb federal debt and deficit, its embrace of the same policies led to the asylum-seekers fiasco and Bill Shorten's ethics problems set out by the Heydon royal commission into union corruption.

E. Entitlements. Bishop claimed her tax-funded spending was within the rules set by the independent remuneration tribunal, which took the sense of entitlement to a new level.

F. Finance Department. The department was vetting her expense claims and has already imposed a \$1300 fine for claiming a helicopter charter.

G. Geelong. Bishop's office spent \$5227 a helicopter from Melbourne to Geelong instead of using a car for the 50-minute drive.

H. Halton, Jane. The secretary of the Finance Department could have found that Bishop had breached the spirit of the rules, if not the letter, which would provide the trigger to require her resignation.

I. International travel. Bishop spent \$336,000 on overseas travel since assuming the role 20 months ago. In October, she ran up a bill of \$88,000 for a three-week trip to Europe.

J. Jones, Damien. As Bishop's chief of staff, Jones had oversight of her spending and also has a good friend who operates the aviation hire firm used for the helicopter charter and probably aircraft charters to other regional cities.

K. Kroger, Michael. As far back as 1999, when Bishop was minister for aged care in the Howard government, she claimed parliamentary travel expenses for a trip to the wedding of Liberal powerbroker Michael Kroger in Melbourne. As a junior minister, she was one of the top spenders of parliamentary travel allowances.

L. Limousines. The biggest single inflator of Bishop's enormous overseas travel bills has been her penchant for having hired cars on standby all day and evening.

M. Mirabella, Sophie. In 2006, Bishop claimed the cost of attending Mirabella's wedding under parliamentary travel entitlements. Other MPs who attended the wedding made no claim or refunded the cost. Bishop did not.

N. Nowra. Nowra is just 150 kilometres from Sydney, yet in November, Bishop's office spent more than \$6000 chartering a private jet to fly her to a Liberal Party fundraiser.

O. Opposition. Labor has an unpopular leader and a flimsy policy resume but has been on a holiday from scrutiny since Bishop assumed a starring role.

P. Party room. Bishop ignored the convention that Speakers do not attend party room meetings, which Labor was able to use to question her impartiality.

Q. Queen. Bishop's image as a diva ceased to be amusing when it was revealed that her lifestyle was costing \$400,000 a year in parliamentary allowances, in addition to her \$341,477 salary and the cost of maintaining her offices and staff in Canberra and Sydney. She costs taxpayers about \$1 million a year.

R. Ridicule. Condemnation of Bishop is universal and extends to a line-up of the Prime Minister's favourite political analysts – Andrew Bolt, Miranda Devine, Janet Albrechsten, Dennis Shanahan, Chris Kenny and Paul Murray. All had expressed dismay at Bishop's determination to cling on.

S. Shorten, Bill. The Labor leader has been shielded from a true scandal, revealed in the Heydon royal commission, that about \$75,000 in payments was made by a company, via a slush fund, to pay for Shorten's campaign manager during his run for parliament in 2007. This funding was undeclared.

T. Treasurer. When Joe Hockey said Bishop's use of a helicopter to attend a Liberal fundraiser "did not pass the sniff test", Bishop responded disparagingly, saying "Joe says some funny things sometimes, doesn't he? I think he said poor people don't drive cars or something".

U. Untenable. Bishop's position was untenable. Which means Abbott's position was becoming untenable.

V. Vanity. After a sequence of revelations about the cost of the helicopter and her foreign travel, Bishop declined to apologise, placing her sense of her own dignity over the welfare of the government. She also described the story as "a political beat-up". This confirmed her level of obtuseness about her predicament.

W. Wilkie, Andrew. The respected independent MP says Bishop damaged the standing of parliament and he would move a no confidence motion in her speakership if she remained in the chair when parliament resumes on August 10, setting a deadline for disgrace.

X. X Factor. More revelations of Bishop's grandiosity kept ebbing out, like a corrosive drip of acid on the image of the government.

Y. Young. Last year, another chartered aircraft was used to fly Bishop to another Liberal fundraiser at the NSW town of Young. The cost is yet unknown.

Z. Zero credibility. Bishop's claims that she was also attending to parliamentary business during her visits to various Liberal fundraisers and weddings has not been taken seriously by anyone. Her gravitas was gone. It was over.

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/end-game-time-for-abbott-to-move-his-bishop-20150801-gipjzn.html>