

Pardon me, Canberra, your hypocrisy is showing

By Maurice Newman, The Australian, 20 December 2014

On November 30 the government announced the establishment of a royal commission into the financial services sector.

In a joint statement, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison said the inquiry would consider “the conduct of banks, insurers, financial services providers and superannuation funds (not including self-managed superannuation funds). This will be a sensible, efficient and focused inquiry into misconduct and practices falling below community standards and expectations.”

Did the Prime Minister and Treasurer shuffle about as they made this announcement? Did they seem shifty in their ill-fitting self-righteous clothing as they took to the moral high ground? Did they give a second’s thought to an independent investigation into parliamentary practices that fell well “below community standards and expectations”? Answer: not on your life.

The sins of the financial services industry are one thing but, unlike their political masters, business leaders are governed by many layers of regulation and civil processes that offer recourse through prosecution, individual claims and class actions for suspected or proven misconduct.

Yet should anything threaten the Canberra collective, it simply closes ranks. After all, with so many privileges and the prospect of superannuation benefits beyond most Australians’ dreams of avarice, this cartel is impregnable.

Take the citizenship crisis that began last July. It continues to shine an unwelcome light on politicians’ links to other countries. Australia’s Constitution expressly bans parliamentarians from being entitled to the rights or privileges of, or to be a subject or citizen of, a foreign power. Yet 10 per cent of the parliament has resigned or remains under suspicion for just that.

Meanwhile, Turnbull and Bill Shorten are locked in a standoff over which MPs whose citizenship is in doubt should be referred to the High Court. How dare they sit in judgment when they have tried to cover up the ineligibility of some colleagues, pushed a “don’t ask, don’t tell” agreement and scoffed at each other’s “carelessness” in a calculated attempt to deceive the public.

It explains why Turnbull supporter and Liberal frontbencher Arthur Sinodinos has yet to be referred to the High Court. Born in NSW to Greek parents, he may not be registered as a Greek citizen but neither has he renounced that citizenship and therefore may be lawfully bound by the policies and rights conferred by the Greek government.

Shorten factional ally David Feeney claims he renounced his British entitlements in 2007, but neither he nor the British Home Office can find the papers. The same Feeney forgot to declare a \$2.3 million house in his register of pecuniary interests. Yet Labor sheltered him.

This is the Canberra culture. Do as I say, not as I do.

Take our jetsetting Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop. She claimed \$1.2m in expenses last year, including a trip to Sydney for a film premiere and a day at the polo. She charged taxpayers \$7000 for four trips to Adelaide that coincided with her older sister’s birthdays. The *Herald Sun* also found eight occasions when official business took her to the same city her beloved Eagles were playing away games. Nothing to see there.

Nor when Labor frontbencher Tony Burke was forced to declare two undisclosed separate stays worth thousands of dollars at Eddie Obeid's luxury Perisher ski lodge in 2004 to 2006. Or when Burke took his family on a taxpayer-funded business class trip to Uluru during the 2012 school holidays, or used a family reunion entitlement to take four family members from Ballina back to Sydney during the 2010 school holidays. To be fair, he did repay \$94 claimed as travel expenses to attend a Robbie Williams concert.

In a seven-year period, Burke claimed more than \$4.6m, or almost \$60,000 a month in expenses. He is now manager of opposition business. Go figure.

But even this "anything goes" culture has limits. When Labor senator Sam Dastyari allowed a Chinese government-linked company to pay off a \$1600 travel debt, give him two bottles of Grange worth \$1400 (disclosed as "two bottles of wine") and meet a \$40,000 legal bill, the obvious conflict finally became too much for him to remain on the frontbench and then in the Senate. That's how low the bar is. No wonder Donald Trump's "drain the swamp" resonates so strongly with the electorate.

If companies gave false profit guidance the way governments promise a return to budget surplus, boards and management would face serious Australian Securities & Investments Commissions charges. If a business claimed it could deliver a new broadband network for \$26 billion when the ultimate cost was about three times that, then those responsible would be sued for negligence. But not in politics. Politicians take big bets using other people's money. They take credit for successes while taxpayers underwrite their mistakes. This is a bad deal for taxpayers.

The financial services royal commission is a rank political exercise that serves to remind us of the double standards and questionable competence of those who have commissioned it.

It will make recommendations that politicians, who thrive on populism and headlines and, whose priority is tenure, will implement.

It's the risk we run when our parliament consists of careerists whose real-world experience is limited to being a political staff member or a trade union official. It's an unpredictable mix of ambition and dangerous ideology. It highlights a crisis in governance and a crying need to widen the gene pool of our elected representatives. What was once a noble pursuit of public service has been corrupted by mercenaries. If liberties have to be taken, the ends justify the means.

Political parties may compete for the spoils of office, but ideologically their differences are blurred, and when push comes to shove they have demonstrated where their loyalties really lie. And it's not with the Australian people.