

When is an offer not an offer? Ask Julie Bishop

Written by The Conversation

The government's [war on Human Rights Commission president](#) Gillian Triggs has deepened into a major test of credibility, with Foreign Minister Julie Bishop flatly contradicting evidence given by a senior public servant.

Bishop was asked in parliament on Wednesday what role the government had offered Triggs – who it was trying to pressure out of the commission.

The minister gave the House a short, unequivocal reply. “I can advise that no such offer was made.”

This sits totally at odds with what Chris Moraitis, secretary of the Attorney-General's department, said to a Senate estimates hearing on Tuesday.

Moraitis said that Attorney-General George Brandis had instructed him to tell Triggs that Brandis had lost confidence in her as commission chair but that “the government was prepared to consider a specific senior role, which was mentioned to me and which I conveyed, for Professor Triggs”.

Moraitis couldn't inform the committee of the nature of the role, he said, because “I have been told that actually it is quite sensitive, involving other matters that I would rather not go into in public”.

This could hardly be more specific, and why Bishop, usually so smart, would put herself into a corner is a mystery.

It's all the stranger because Bishop based her answer on a personal discussion on Wednesday with Moraitis, who until recently was a deputy secretary in her department. He's someone she regards highly and was sorry to lose.

When is an offer not an offer? Ask Julie Bishop

Written by The Conversation

In answering a subsequent question Bishop said Moraitis had confirmed to her that Triggs had not been asked to resign and was not offered an “inducement” to leave.

The first point is playing with words. Moraitis had been dispatched to try to get Triggs to quit, though he said he didn’t use the word “resignation” – something disputed by Triggs.

As to whether the offer was an “inducement” within the legal meaning – that is a matter being examined by the Australian Federal Police.

One possible explanation of Bishop’s claim was that she might be defining offer as meaning a detailed job description, salary, and so forth. But she didn’t say so.

An interesting sidelight is that the role offered apparently was in an area of Triggs' international expertise that she and Brandis had canvassed on a couple of previous occasions.

For the second day, Tony Abbott ranted against Triggs and the children in detention report, dismissing “Shorten QC” as obsessed with “Canberra insider nonsense”.

The opposition cut short its questions to try unsuccessfully to suspend standing orders to move a censure against Brandis. Although Bill Shorten delivered a strong speech that tapped into people’s negative views about “the angry prime minister”, it could have been more productive to probe with more questions whether Bishop was misleading the parliament. The censure debate could have waited a day; the Senate, with the government in a minority, may censure Brandis next week.

While the row over the Human Rights Commission turned into a lawyers' picnic, alternative leader Malcolm Turnbull conspicuously distanced himself from the government’s tactics.

Turnbull told reporters he didn’t want to get involved in comment – “other people can do that if they wish”.

When is an offer not an offer? Ask Julie Bishop

Written by The Conversation

“I’m not going to engage in a discussion about personalities,” Turnbull said.

Turnbull had known Triggs for many years and “she’s a very distinguished international legal academic”, he said. “The critical thing is the children.”

Turnbull also marked out his own territory on another stick of dynamite that’s sitting under the government – [the leaked correspondence](#) from Liberal Party treasurer Philip Higginson, who has called for more financial transparency and accountability in the party, and attacked the Peta Credlin-Brian Loughnane diarchy.

Abbott on Tuesday dismissed the Higginson “storm in a teacup”; Turnbull on Wednesday said “we should as a party set a very high standard in accountability and transparency”.

Meanwhile, Social Services Minister Scott Morrison, who would likely be treasurer if there were a Turnbull government, was giving an impressive National Press Club performance in making the case for the reform of the nation’s welfare system, always a fraught subject.

Morrison framed his argument in terms of the positives that might be achieved if changes could be made. No-one could miss the sharp contrast with the more negative and punishing language that has been adopted by Hockey in his budget pitches.

Listen to the latest [Politics with Michelle Grattan podcast with guest, Cathy McGowan, here](#)

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/when-is-an-offer-not-an-offer-ask-julie-bishop-38045>