

## **Dastyari forced off frontbench**

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Labor senator Sam Dastyari has been forced to quit the frontbench after Opposition Leader Bill Shorten decided his position was untenable.

Shorten reached his conclusion following Dastyari's Tuesday's news conference in which he failed to explain his behaviour in having a personal debt paid by Chinese interests. Dastyari also could not adequately account for his comment, reported in the Chinese media, on the South China Sea which was at odds with Labor policy. He suggested he had either misspoken or been misquoted.

The government has strongly targeted Dastyari, including Malcolm Turnbull while he was in China, and it was clear to Shorten that if Dastyari – who was shadow minister for consumer affairs and manager of opposition business in the Senate – stayed on the frontbench, Labor's attack on the government would be severely blunted.

There was also concern in Labor ranks that more damaging information about Dastyari might be about to come out.

Previously, Shorten had stood by the 33-year-old Dastyari – while saying he had counselled him about his inappropriate actions – hoping the furore could be ridden out without Dastyari being ditched from the frontbench.

Dastari had Top Education Institute, which has strong ties to the Chinese government, pay a A\$1,670 debt he had to the Finance Department when he exceeded his staff travel allowance.

He also appeared before the election at a news conference with a leading Chinese donor – who had previously paid a legal bill for him – at which he reportedly said: “The South China Sea is China's own affair. On this issue, Australia should remain neutral and respect China's decision.” This was softer than Labor policy.

Shortly before the Dastyari announcement a media report suggested he might have broken ALP

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rules by accepting the money for the debts.

Appearing before the media early Wednesday evening, Dastyari said he had spoken to Shorten and offered his resignation from the frontbench.

“From the beginning, I freely admitted that I made a mistake. I made all the necessary disclosures and what I did was within the rules but it was wrong. I fell short of the duty I owe to the people I’m so proud to represent,” he said.

“It’s clear that the ongoing examination of my behaviour is taking attention away from bigger issues facing Australia and Australians,” he said.

“It’s clear to me now that this has become a distraction. The last thing a government as bad and divided as this one deserves is a free pass.

“I made a mistake and I’m paying the price for that mistake,” he said.

Dastyari didn’t take any questions.

Shorten said in a statement: “Sam made a mistake and now he’s paying a heavy price.

“Sam is a young bloke with a bright future ahead of him. He has a lot more to offer Labor and Australia.

“I’m confident he will continue to make a strong contribution to my team.”

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*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

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