

## Dastyari demoted again – but government demands he leave parliament

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Bill Shorten has forced Labor senator Sam Dastyari to quit as opposition deputy whip in the Senate – but the government is demanding he quits parliament over his dealings with a Chinese national of interest to Australian security agencies.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull accused Dastyari of a “failure of loyalty” to Australia and said he “should get out of the Senate, full stop”.

“Dastyari has shown he does not put Australia first and he does not owe his first loyalty to Australia,” Turnbull said.

Shorten’s move against Dastyari followed the media on Wednesday revealing [audio](#) of his 2016 remarks to a local Chinese media news conference supporting China’s position in relation to the South China Sea and contradicting Labor policy.

The audio made it clear his comments were deliberate; previously he had downplayed them when a fragment was reported.

On Wednesday, it was [revealed](#) Dastyari had told business figure and political donor Huang Xiangmo that his phone was likely tapped, and they should go outside Huang’s house to have their conversation.

Dastyari has said he went to the house of Huang – who had been at his side at the news conference – to say they should not have further contact, after the controversy over money Huang provided Dastyari and the policy comments. The controversy had cost Dastyari his frontbench position.

In a statement to the Senate on Thursday morning Dastyari, who also loses his position as chairman of a Senate committee, said he had been called by Shorten on Wednesday night and “asked to resign from my position in the Labor Senate organisational leadership”.

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He insisted that he had “never had a briefing by any Australian security agency ever. I’ve never passed on classified information and I’ve never been in the possession of any. As I’ve repeatedly said, if I was ever given any security advice from any agency, I would follow it to the letter.”

Dastyari said he found “the inferences that I’m anything but a patriotic Australian deeply hurtful”.

Shorten shows no sign of seeking to have Dastyari leave parliament. He could not force him to do so – all Labor could do would be to expel him from the party.

Shorten said he had not taken the decision to demote Dastyari lightly. “I told senator Dastyari that his mischaracterisation of how he came to make comments contradicting Labor policy made his position untenable.

“I also told him that while I accept his word that he never had, nor disclosed, any classified information, his handling of these matters showed a lack of judgement.

“I know that senator Dastyari will learn from this experience.”

The government is homing in particularly on Dastyari’s advice to Huang about his phone being likely tapped, and how to avoid surveillance of their conversation.

Turnbull also contrasted his behaviour with the situation of those who have had to resign because of their dual citizenship.

Senators had resigned who had no allegiance to any country other than Australia but because of a foreign law of which they weren’t aware, he said. “This is a senator who has made it abundantly clear that his first allegiance is not to Australia.”

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He had taken money to pay his personal debts “from a foreign national who is very, very close indeed to a foreign government.

“Now we learn – and he has not denied it – that he has been providing counter-surveillance advice to that foreign national in order, presumably, so that what he assumed were the operations of Australia’s security agencies could be frustrated.

“Sam Dastyari has shown that he is not on Australia’s side and it’s time he got out of Australia’s parliament,” Turnbull said.

Attorney-General George Brandis told the Senate: “It is not good enough for Mr Shorten to think that he can overcome this latest embarrassment merely by, once again, temporarily benching senator Sam Dastyari.

“It is not good enough because senator Dastyari has not only compromised himself – he has compromised his office and he can no longer remain.”

Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong said Dastyari had done the wrong thing, but questioned how information from national security agencies had become public. She said she hoped Brandis would be “as persistent and determined to find out how that has occurred as he has to point the finger at senator Dastyari”.

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

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