

Shorten puts pressure on Turnbull over anti-corruption body

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten has pledged a Labor government would set up a National Integrity Commission in its first year – not because of any known corrupt conduct, but to restore people's trust in the political system.

Shorten said the body – which has been canvassed for years without being adopted by either major party – would operate “as a standing royal commission into serious and systematic corruption”.

The remit of the commission, with extensive powers and costing an estimated A\$58.7 million over the forward estimates, would cover MPs and their staffs, the Commonwealth judiciary, the governor-general, Commonwealth public servants and statutory office holders, and businesses and people who transact with the Commonwealth.

Its commissioner and two deputies would each have fixed five-year non-renewable terms, and be appointed by parliament on a bipartisan basis, with the body overseen by a parliamentary committee.

Shorten said: “I’m not putting this policy forward because I’m aware of any corrupt conduct – if I was, I would report it. I’m doing this because I want to restore people’s faith in their representatives and the system.”

“I want the National Integrity Commission to be a clear, concrete and impartial mechanism to restore trust, accountability and transparency in the public sector.”

The commission was announced in Shorten’s Tuesday National Press Club address, in which he also put private health funds and employers on notice and made cost of living a central theme.

He said Labor was looking at “options” to contain health premiums, including better monitoring of the increasing range of exclusions from coverage that was “turning health insurance into a

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con". "Business as usual is not cutting it," he told the funds, especially the big ones.

In Tuesday's [Essential poll](#), more than eight in ten people agreed with the proposition that "the government should do more to keep private health insurance affordable".

He said the minimum wage was "no longer a living wage", and enterprise bargaining was "on life support". "It's never been easier for business to take the drastic option, nuclear option, detonate negotiations, terminate agreements and threaten to send workers back to award minimums unless they accept a cut to their wages and conditions," he said.

"We need to revisit the living wage", and Labor would "put the bargaining back into enterprise bargaining". For example, companies should not be allowed to unilaterally terminate agreements.

Shorten declined to state what Labor would do about the tax cuts legislated for companies with turnovers up to \$50 million, beyond reiterating that it would not disturb those for firms with up to \$2 million turnover.

Shorten's embrace of an integrity commission puts pressure on Malcolm Turnbull over the issue. Speaking in anticipation of Shorten's formal announcement, the prime minister said the government was reviewing the recent [report from a Senate committee](#) on such a body. "We haven't ruled it out" but "it isn't something to embark on in a rushed or ill-considered way", he said.

The Senate committee, chaired by Labor and reporting in September, said the national integrity framework should be strengthened "to make it more coherent, comprehensive and accessible". It suggested the government consider establishing an agency "with broad scope and jurisdiction to address integrity and corruption matters".

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, who was dismissive of the need for a new body on Sunday, remained critical on Tuesday. "Why it concerns me is this: when you make a decision that your department doesn't agree with, such as maybe investing in a country road, you end up

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before ICAC and if that's the case you just take away the capacity for a government to govern.

"You'll be terrified to make a decision that's different to your department," he said.

"If you're corrupt you're going to get busted, you're going to get caught and you're going to go to jail. We found out Sam Dastyari without ICAC."

The Greens welcomed the integrity commission promise but stressed the need to also reform the political donations regime – a point Shorten also made.

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 their academic appointment.

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