

# Australian parliamentary speaker resigns amid scandal over helicopter ride

Peter Symonds  
3 August 2015

After three weeks of public controversy over her travel and accommodation expenses, Bronwyn Bishop resigned yesterday as Australian parliamentary speaker. The scandal, which first emerged over a helicopter ride costing \$5,227 from the city of Melbourne to the nearby regional centre of Geelong, was prominently featured in the media, along with demands by the opposition Labor Party for her removal.

Bishop's resignation is a blow to Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who stood by his close ally throughout. The affair has again highlighted fractures within Abbott's Liberal Party and the ruling Liberal-National Coalition government. Senior ministers either criticised Bishop or refused to publicly back her.

Bishop was finally forced to resign amid a brewing revolt by government backbenchers over the weekend that threatened to destabilise Abbott's own leadership. One government MP told the *Australian* that the scandal was a wound that "won't stop bleeding" and another said it had already "burned" the government.

Above all, however, Bishop and her extravagant spending at taxpayers' expense were becoming a focus for public hostility toward the entire parliamentary set-up. Fairfax Media journalist Phillip Coorey noted: "The extraordinary voter anger that Bishop has provoked is inversely proportional to the sums of money involved and it is not confined to those from the Coalition. Focus group polling seen by this column shows that Bishop's behaviour has reflected poorly on all politicians."

Bishop, who personally embodies the wealthy layers of Sydney's North Shore, not only generated resentment over the helicopter ride to a Liberal Party fundraising—a trip by road of just one hour. She also thumbed her nose at public opinion by initially refusing to say that she did anything wrong. While repaying the money, Bishop even stonewalled over making any

apology until last Thursday.

Revelations then continued to pile up. Over the weekend, it was reported that Bishop spent \$6,000 on a charter flight from Sydney to the town of Nowra, 160 kilometres to the south, as well as thousands of dollars a week on chauffeur-driven limousines. Once she was installed as House of Representatives speaker 20 months ago, at an annual salary of \$341,000, she managed by one estimate to accumulate \$336,000 in international travel.

While Bishop has been the butt of media jokes and ridicule, she simply exemplifies the privileged position of parliamentarians, ministers and opposition frontbenches. Their salaries range from \$195,000 to \$507,000 for the prime minister—before generous travel and other allowances that can double those figures.

These salaries and the accompanying lifestyle only underline the social chasm between the majority of working people and the parliamentarians and the corporate elites whose interests they represent. The average full-time wage for an Australian worker is \$58,700 a year and the minimum wage is \$34,200, while a single unemployed person struggles to survive on poverty-level benefits of just \$13,500.

The Bishop scandal threatened to bring these rarely discussed issues to the surface of public life, and reignite discussion over the Abbott government's harsh austerity measures. The lavish parliamentary entitlements for MPs highlight the hypocrisy of the government's appeals for sacrifice from all. Treasurer Joe Hockey called for the end to "the Age of Entitlement" in the 2014 budget, which set out sweeping inroads into pensions, unemployment benefits, health and education, and other areas of public spending.

In her brief resignation statement yesterday, Bishop

alluded to the potential for the “Choppergate” scandal to further undermine public confidence in parliament. She quit “because of my love and respect for the institution of the parliament and the Australian people.” Editorials in the major newspapers today all welcomed her decision. The *Australian Financial Review* declared that the government needed “to conserve its limited political capital for the serious policy decisions that need to be made.”

Less than six months ago, Abbott barely survived what he described as “a near death experience” amid a backbench revolt against his leadership. At issue was not his leadership style or failure to communicate, but growing concern within the Liberal Party about deep-going public resentment over the 2014 budget measures. Attempts by Abbott and Hockey to moderate the 2015 budget and dress it up as more egalitarian have only led to mounting criticism in corporate circles and demands for savage austerity measures as the economy is hit by falling commodity prices and growing signs of recession.

The latest scandal has further exposed Abbott’s vulnerability. His chief leadership rival, Malcolm Turnbull, refused to publicly back Bishop, while Hockey and Social Services Minister Scott Morrison openly criticised her spending. The continuing tensions in the Liberal Party leadership reflect divisions over how best to impose deeply unpopular social measures, as well as tactical differences over Australia’s role in Washington’s “pivot to Asia” and military build-up against China.

Bishop’s resignation may not end the turmoil in government ranks. In his comments, Abbott exonerated Bishop, blaming instead the system of parliamentary entitlements. He proposed a “root and branch” review of the allowances system in order to “restore public respect.” His remarks provoked a new round of criticism. A comment by *Australian Financial Review* political editor Laura Tingle was headlined: “It wasn’t Bronny, it was the system. Seriously PM?”

The affair has also demonstrated the utter cynicism and hypocrisy of the Labor opposition, which mounted daily attacks on Bishop’s “born to rule” attitude and contempt for ordinary people. On every major issue impacting on the working class, Labor is in bipartisan unity with the Abbott government. It fully supports Australian involvement in US war plans against China,

has voted for anti-terror legislation that tears up basic democratic rights and legal norms, and at its recent party conference confirmed that a Labor government would maintain the government’s draconian anti-refugee policies, including using the navy to turn back asylum seeker boats.

At the same conference, Labor leader Bill Shorten reaffirmed that a Labor government would be “fiscally responsible”—in other words, would implement deeper budget cutbacks. The previous Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard enacted austerity measures that laid the basis for the Abbott government’s budgets. In 2014 and again this year, Labor voted for key Coalition government spending cuts.

The very fact that the “Choppergate” affair has been front and centre in Australian politics for weeks underscores the enormous disconnect between the political establishment and the vast majority of the population. Scandals, personal smear and so-called wedge issues dominate the media precisely because of the lack of any significant differences between any of the establishment parties on the pressing issues of war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**