



Australian politics

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Labor wins votes in lower house to force Coalition to debate banking inquiry

Government caught flat-footed as absent Coalition MPs allow Labor to capture control of the chamber and argue case for banking royal commission

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The Turnbull government has lost its first votes on the floor of the House of Representatives as Labor intensified its political attack on the [Coalition](#) using the spearhead of the banking royal commission.

Labor moved on Thursday night to bring a motion calling for a banking royal commission that had cleared the Senate earlier in the day. The motion passed on a 50-49 vote, catching the government entirely flat-footed as the House was set to adjourn.

The government lost the initial procedural votes because senior figures, including the immigration minister Peter Dutton, and two justice ministers Michael Keenan and Christian Porter, were not in the chamber.

Government sources later claimed Labor MPs had deliberately created the impression they were leaving the parliamentary precinct only to return to bring on the procedural bunfight.

As well as the absence of ministers, one Liberal backbencher, Craig Kelly, went for a walk outside the building minus his mobile phone. The lost votes enabled Labor to capture control of the chamber and argue the case for the banking royal commission for around three evening. The opposition claimed the last time a majority government lost a vote on the floor of the House was 1962.

Over the course of a fractious and heavily contested parliamentary day, the government moved to return fire on the opposition, [interviewed Labor senator, Sam Dastyari](#), over his decision to ask a Chinese donor to cover a \$1,670 expenses bill when he overshot his parliamentary allowance.

In addition to the payment, Dastyari subsequently gave a public assurance that he would respect China's stance on the South China Sea held during the federal election, [according to a report in the Australian Financial Review](#).

Senior government ministers compared Dastyari's actions to conduct by the Liberal MP Stuart Robert, who lost his spot in the ministerial controversy.

The trade minister, Steve Ciobo, declared the Labor man, like Robert, had to be dumped from the frontbench. The opposition government in the Senate, George Brandis, questioned whether Dastyari had been "compromised".

[Over the course of Thursday in Canberra:](#)

Labor's Senate leader, Penny Wong, moved a motion calling on the government to establish a banking royal commission, and for that motion to be communicated to the House of Representatives for concurrence. That motion passed despite government opposition, resulting in a lost Senate vote of this term - and then the political fight cascaded into the House, with debate stretching into the evening;

The government lost a second Senate vote. A motion moved by Labor's Lisa Singh, and opposed by the Coalition, criticising the trade seekers on Nauru in the wake of the publication of the Nauru files, and calling for the establishment of a children's advocate, passed.

Labor also succeeded in referring to the privileges committee [questions about whether there had been "improper interference" or "interference"](#) with Labor's deputy Senate leader Stephen Conroy's free performance as a senator during controversial raids in the last week related to leaks from the NBN Co.

Labor set up the evening procedural ambush in question time, where the Labor leader [Bill Shorten](#) made the case for a royal commission with a group of banking victims in parliament house.

The group also met with Peter Whish-Wilson, the Greens' treasury spokesman, who is a former banker. They did not meet with Malcolm Shorten's [invitation to the prime minister last week](#).

Naomi Halpern, a spokesperson for the [Holt Norman Ashman Baker Action Group](#) - said the meetings went well, and that Shorten had agreed to meet again, in Melbourne next week. Halpern's group included members of the Timbercorp financial scandal.

Turnbull criticised Labor for the tactic, reasoning the royal commission would only be a forum for the legal profession to spend millions of dollars, go on for years and deliver no practical improvements.

The prime minister declared "populism" would not help the victims of banking industry scandals, but practical action would, and be taken by the government.

"What we have in place are ombudsman services. We have legal services. We have ASIC," the prime minister said. "The only beneficial commission would be, frankly, the legal profession."

In the evening debate the treasurer, Scott Morrison, rounded on the opposition. He said the motion in the House was "a stunt from a stunt" - meaning the banking royal commission.

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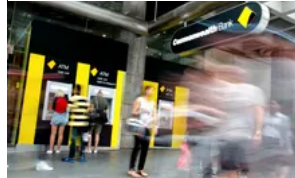
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