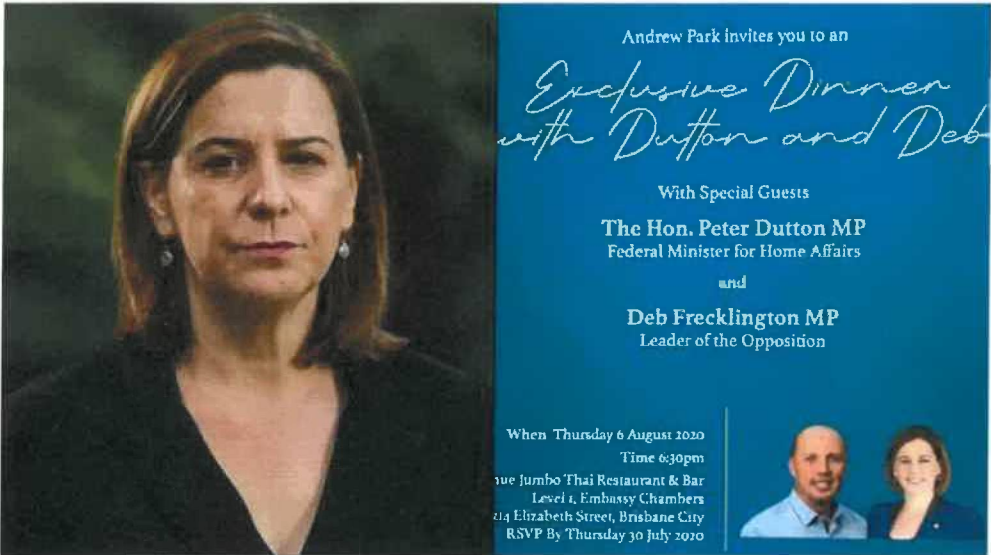


LNP Opposition Leader Deb Frecklington campaign in crisis after being referred by own party to election watchdog

ABC Investigations / By Josh Robertson

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Deb Frecklington has been referred to Queensland's election watchdog by her own party. (ABC News/Supplied)

Deb Frecklington insisted it was not a fundraiser.

After all, the dinner host was a property developer — so any hospitality for a Liberal National Party fundraiser could be illegal.

But then, the donations started showing up.

Within days, five guests donated the same amount to her campaign: \$2,500.

In all, eight people who went to that private August 18 dinner at developer Nic De Luca's multimillion-dollar home on the Brisbane River would donate a total of \$28,800 to LNP coffers.

As Queensland's Opposition Leader seeks to topple Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk, ABC Investigations has uncovered a political crisis inside the LNP that now threatens to derail Ms Frecklington's state election campaign.

Key points:

- Queensland Opposition Leader Deb Frecklington has been referred to the state election watchdog by her own party
- The LNP referred Ms Frecklington over concerns a series of fundraising events could have violated laws aimed at curbing the political influence of property developers
- The internal party crisis comes just weeks before Queenslanders head to the polls, where Ms Frecklington is vying with Anastacia Palaszczuk to become the state's Premier

A series of exclusive gatherings linking a network of wealthy donors, Queensland's property elite and Home Affairs Minister and LNP heavyweight Peter Dutton, have landed Ms Frecklington in an

unthinkable scenario just weeks before Queenslanders head to the polls.

The ABC can reveal that Ms Frecklington has been reported to the state electoral watchdog by her own party, over fears that fundraising for her campaign may have broken laws aimed at curbing the political influence of developers.

A number of attendees made donations totalling almost \$150,000 either side of the events.

While none of the developers appear to have made donations — and they deny paying to be there — their presence at these events caused considerable concern inside LNP headquarters.

Ms Frecklington declined an interview with the ABC and avoided answering detailed questions around her referral to the Electoral Commission of Queensland (ECQ).

"Anyone who donates to the party must complete a declaration that they are not a prohibited donor," Ms Frecklington's spokesman said.

"There is transparency about who has donated and who hasn't donated."



Opposition Leader Deb Frecklington says allegations she's been referred to the election watchdog are "absolutely not correct". (ABC News: Stephanie Zillman)

Speaking at a media event after this story was first published, [Ms Frecklington said she stood by her integrity.](#)

"I haven't heard from them [the ECQ] at all," Ms Frecklington said today.

"In relation to private dinners, I attend dinners all the time — I'm a politician."

A spokesman for the LNP said: "The ABC's allegation that the LNP has referred Deb Frecklington to the ECQ is false. It has not."

"The LNP regularly communicates with the ECQ to ensure that we comply with the act."

Three party sources told the ABC the matter was investigated internally by state director Michael O'Dwyer.

He referred it to the ECQ after Ms Frecklington responded to a 'show cause' notice, they said.

"It's semantics," one source said of the LNP's response.

A gathering of 'like-minded people'

On the day he dined with Ms Frecklington at the waterfront De Luca mansion, businessman Ben Cameron, who is not a prohibited donor, gave \$2,000 to the LNP.

Asked by the ABC if there was any connection between his donation and his presence at the dinner, Mr Cameron said: "No, not really."

"Just a gathering of like-minded people, to be quite honest."



Deb Frecklington (second from right) on the campaign trail. (ABC News: Rachel Riga)

But he concedes there was a political complexion to the event.

"If Deb Frecklington was there, it obviously was," he said.

Alarm bells ring in LNP headquarters

The De Luca dinner was the fifth in a series of events in July and August attended by men who have donated to the LNP this campaign.

All featured Ms Frecklington as a drawcard.

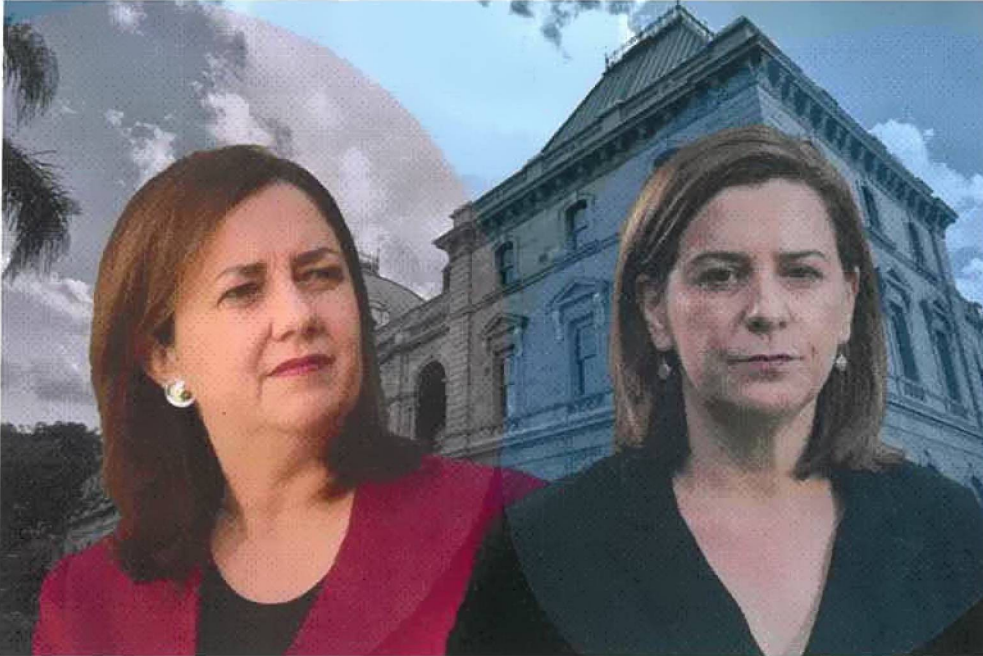
The events, which were not party sanctioned but organised with her office, caused such concern within LNP HQ that it launched an internal investigation into whether donor laws may have been broken.

LNP officials took legal advice before handing a brief of evidence detailing its concerns to the ECQ — the independent watchdog.

A key concern, according to three party sources, is an account given by a developer, Todd Brown, of Belmonde Property, that another prohibited donor allegedly instructed him to funnel illegal donations to the LNP via an industry body before the developer attended the event in August.

When contacted by the ABC, Mr Brown denied he was propositioned for money.

"I was never told it was a fundraiser or asked to pay to attend. I was not requested to, nor did I pay any money to any third party."



Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk and Opposition Leader Deb Frecklington will contest the October 31 election. (ABC News: Lisa Batty And Chris Gillette)

The Electoral Commission of Queensland would not confirm or deny if it is investigating Ms Frecklington or other people named in the referral.

It is Queensland's first state election since laws designed to curb the risk of corruption around government decisions on development projects were introduced in 2018 by the Palaszczuk Labor Government.

Any political party or operative who makes or accepts donations from property developers or industry bodies representing developers faces up to a \$52,220 fine, or two years in prison.

Anyone who knowingly tries to circumvent the ban faces up to a \$195,825 fine, or 10 years in prison.

The ban in 2018 forced the resignation of LNP president Gary Spence, himself a developer, who railed against a "financial gerrymander" aimed at cutting off fundraising from a longstanding LNP support base.

A long, exclusive lunch

By June 2020, political donations were harder to come by.

COVID-19 cut off any prospect of big money, traditional fundraising events and corporate donors appeared reluctant to bankroll Ms Frecklington, who was facing an uphill battle to become Queensland Premier.

Then came the LNP's biggest donation from an individual in more than two years.

Geoffrey Thomas was little-known in LNP HQ, but his political associations stretch far beyond Queensland.

A staunch enthusiast of conservative US politics, Mr Thomas has boasted of a friendship with the late Ronald Reagan.

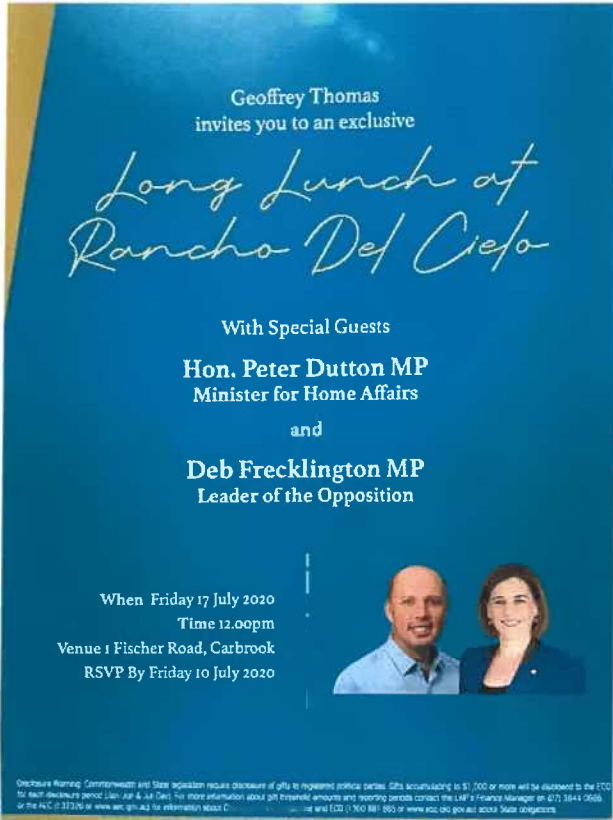
As a Queensland Trade Commissioner, he was twice declared an "honorary Texan" by George W Bush.

Mr Thomas, who is not a prohibited donor, labelled his \$50,000 contribution to the LNP on June 25 as "fundraising."

On July 17, he hosted an LNP fundraiser at Rancho del Cielo ("Ranch in the Sky" in Spanish).

Mr Thomas named his property on the Logan River, south of Brisbane, after Reagan's own Arizona ranch.

Its website describes a "prestigious" corporate events venue with a 12-seat boardroom displaying Australia's "finest" collection of US presidential memorabilia.



The invitation to an exclusive 'Long Lunch' with Peter Dutton and Deb Frecklington at Rancho del Cielo. (Supplied)



Rancho del Cielo, where Peter Dutton and Deb Frecklington were special guests at an LNP advertised event. (Supplied)

The invitation to an "exclusive long lunch at Rancho del Cielo" was produced in Ms Frecklington's office on LNP blue and yellow and carried a fine print "disclosure warning" on donation laws.

It billed special guests Peter Dutton and Ms Frecklington.

The guest list included shadow state police and counter terrorism minister Dan Purdie, alongside wealthy businessmen who had donated generously in the past.

But this time was different: one guest on the list now risked prosecution if they gave the party anything.

Mark Stockwell, a one-time member of Australia's "mean machine" Olympic swimming team turned multimillionaire property developer, had sat on the Trade and Investment Queensland board with the fundraiser host.



Former Olympian now property developer Mark Stockwell (left) and Deb Frecklington (right). *(Supplied)*

Mr Stockwell's business interests in property development mean it would be illegal for him to donate to Ms Frecklington, or any other political campaign.

ECQ returns show seven donations in the same amount — \$5,000 — from other guests or their wives.

Mr Thomas declared an in-kind donation of \$3,268 worth of hospitality.

But the ABC found no evidence of a donation from Mr Stockwell.

Still, he had a seat at the table.

Mr Stockwell said he was "fully conversant with the electoral laws [and] I strictly abide by them".

A lawyer for the host Mr Thomas said, "no money, fees or contribution of any kind have been taken from a prohibited political donor at or for any function hosted by him".

Under the rules, hospitality must be more than \$200 to be classed as a political donation.

Property developers can attend fundraisers, as long as they haven't paid to be there.

Academic Cameron Murray, an expert witness at the 2016 Crime and Corruption Commission inquiry that led to the developer donor ban, said donations were "more like a ticket to entry for newcomers to this relationship network [with politicians] if you're not already at the table."

When the developer donation ban was fresh in late 2018, a wary former Brisbane Lord Mayor Graham Quirk left his food untouched at a developers' association lunch for fear it would count as a prohibited donation.

Association donates \$20k to LNP

The second event to attract LNP scrutiny, also attended by Ms Frecklington, was a rooftop dinner at Le Bain Newstead.

Party sources said the July 20 function was organised by the National Retail Association and co-hosted by its chairman Mr Brodie.

Five days earlier, the association donated \$20,000 on July 15 to the LNP.

Coffee entrepreneur Dean Merlo said the association invited him to the event, but he was not asked to make a donation.

"They did say that Deb Frecklington was going to be there ... I'm not sure whether they said it was a fundraiser," he said.

One guest declared a \$5,000 donation to the LNP the same day via his company.

Another guest told an LNP official he was paying to attend the event as a fundraiser for Ms Frecklington, a party source told the ABC.

Another guest was prominent developer Kim Pradella.

He said he did not make a donation and the ABC could find no record of a donation being made.

"I comply at all times with the guidelines regarding property developers," Mr Pradella said.

A spokesman said the association did not ask members to pay to be guests at its functions and it had not "engaged in any activity designed to circumvent donation laws".

An 'exclusive Dinner with Dutton and Deb'

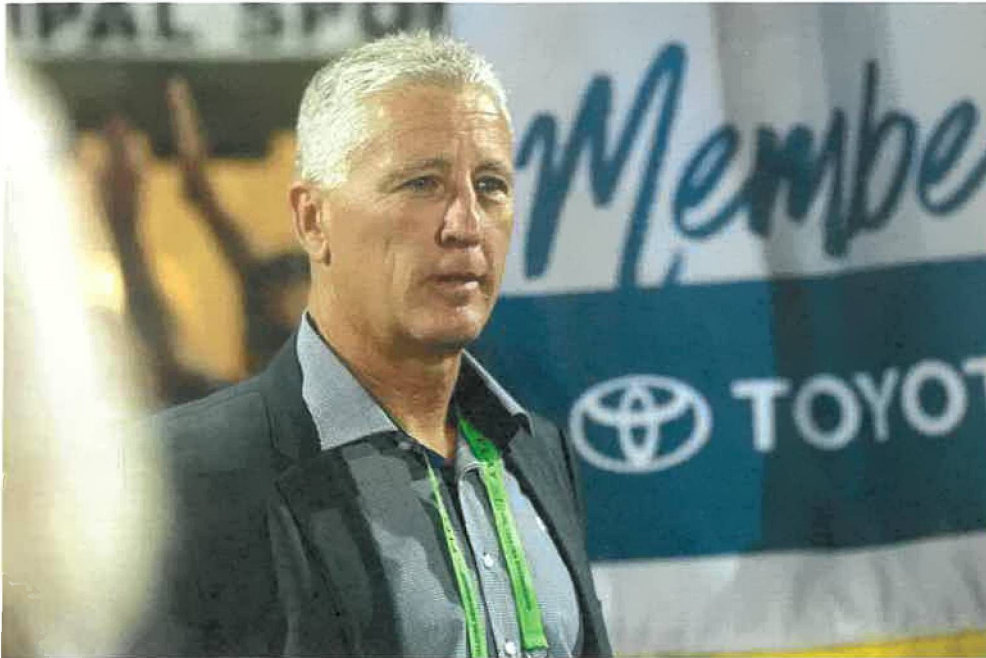
It was clear a further dinner on August 6 hosted by restaurateur, honorary Thai consul and former political adviser to Alexander Downer, Andrew Park, was a fundraiser.

The invitation to an "exclusive dinner with Dutton and Deb" was produced once again in Ms Frecklington's office on party colours and carried a disclosure warning on donations.

It began at City Winery then moved to Mr Park's upmarket Thai restaurant Jumbo.

Mr Park did not respond to ABC questions.

ECQ records show Geoffrey Thomas gave \$3,000 to be there; donations from other guests to the LNP ranged up to \$8,000.



Former North Queensland Cowboys chairman and multi-millionaire private developer Laurence Lancini. (Supplied: North Queensland Cowboys)

Also on the guest list was one of the state's biggest private developers, former North Queensland Cowboys chairman Laurence Lancini, who has an estimated fortune of more than \$150 million.

Mr Lancini said he did not pay for his seat at the table but attended as a guest of two friends.

ECQ records show one of them donated \$12,000 on August 12.

"I didn't contribute any funds, nor was I asked to," he said.

Mr Dutton's office did not respond to questions from the ABC.

'I know I can go to jail if I donate money'

The Crime and Corruption Commission urged Queensland to follow New South Wales' ban on developer donations at the local government level to lower corruption risks around valuable decisions like land rezoning and infrastructure charges.

The jailing last month of disgraced former Ipswich mayor Paul Pisasale, a prominent Labor figure, was a reminder of corruption risks for both sides of politics.

The fourth event to attract LNP scrutiny was on August 13, right inside Queensland's Parliament House.

Do you know more?

Please [use this form](#) to get in contact with the ABC Investigations team, or if you require more secure communication, please choose an [option on the confidential tips page](#).

They dined alongside Ms Frecklington and Gold Coast MP John-Paul Langbroek.

Guests included Gold Coast developer Peter Puljich, who told the ABC he had been invited by Mr Langbroek, his former dentist.

"I was stuck into wine, and it was a good red wine, well, I thought it was good," he said.

"And in all honesty, I never asked anyone to talk any politics. [Ms Frecklington] never spoke to me."

Mr Puljich said he wasn't asked to give a donation.

"I know I can go to jail if I donate money," he said.

Mr Langbroek did not respond to ABC questions.

Frecklington warned about going to events with prohibited donors

By August 18, LNP officials were aware that Ms Frecklington had been going to events attended by prohibited donors.

In a meeting at party headquarters, she was warned to avoid them.

Hours later, she was at the De Luca mansion, the only woman on a guest list with 17 men.

Nic De Luca told the ABC "it wasn't a fundraiser or political, it was just purely people at my house".

"It was a dinner that I had at my house with guests that I invited, and I do that all the time," he said.

Todd Brown of Belmonde Property, which boasts a \$2 billion development portfolio, said "nothing untoward occurred that evening".

The ABC has found no evidence that Mr De Luca or Mr Brown made donations.

Presence of prohibited donors 'highly problematic'

The LNP began investigating.

It had already returned a \$1,565 donation from developer Phil Murphy, who went to a party-organised fundraiser at the Hilton on July 29.

On August 23, LNP state director Michael O'Dwyer issued a warning to all MPs and candidates that any non-compliance with prohibited donor laws "could put the party at risk and hinder the successful election of an LNP government".

"Any private event to which members of parliament and candidates are invited, regardless of its location and whether organised by themselves or anyone else, could reasonably be considered a political event," he said.

"Given the proximity to the election, it would not be unreasonable for any such political event to also be considered a fundraising event, hence any attendance by prohibited donors is highly problematic.

"To ensure full compliance with the legislation and to avoid any perception that the event is a fundraiser attended by prohibited donors, please ensure that prohibited donors are NOT invited to private events and you avoid any such events where it is known that prohibited donors will be in attendance."

The LNP then gave Ms Frecklington a "show cause" notice before referring the matter to the ECQ around early September.

An ECQ spokeswoman said it "takes the position that any examination or investigation which may or may not be underway is confidential".

"This provides the opportunity for perceived issues to be escalated to relevant agencies if required, or resolved, without external commentary that may with or without intent, prejudice an outcome," she said.



23 August 2020

To all MPs and Candidates

Prohibited Donors – Important reminder

I am sure that whilst we all agree that Labor's legislation banning a single class of people (ie. property developers) from participating in the political process is undemocratic, the fact remains that it is the law.

The LNP abides strictly by the law in relation to its fundraising activities and all members of the Party, including Members of Parliament, have previously been provided with advice in terms of complying with the legislation and the Party's internal guidelines.

This is a reminder that it is imperative that all fundraising activities are legally compliant and seen to be legally compliant. Any non-compliance could put the Party at risk and hinder the successful election of an LNP government in October.

So that it is abundantly clear, please note the following important points.

1. Any private event to which Members of Parliament and candidates are invited, regardless of its location and whether organised by themselves or anyone else, could reasonably be considered a political event
2. Given the proximity to the election it would not be unreasonable for any such political event to also be considered a fundraising event, hence any attendance by prohibited donors is highly problematic.
3. The LNP goes to great lengths to ensure that it complies with the law in relation to the amended Electoral Act, and we are particularly cautious of attendance by prohibited donors at fundraising events, or what might be construed as fundraising events
4. **To ensure full compliance with the legislation and to avoid any perception that the event is a fundraiser attended by prohibited donors, please ensure that prohibited donors are NOT invited to private events and you avoid any such events where it is known that prohibited donors will be in attendance**
5. As a matter of prudence:
 - a. You should advise all organisers of private events that prohibited donors should not be invited to the event
 - b. You should request a copy of the attendees before every such event to satisfy yourself that prohibited donors are not attending
 - c. If prohibited donors are attending a private event, you should not attend
 - d. If you or your campaign are organising a fundraising event, ensure that prohibited donors are not invited
 - e. Ensure that any organiser of a fundraising event is not themselves a prohibited donor and is not organising an event on behalf of a prohibited donor

An internal LNP letter warning against meeting with prohibited donors. (Supplied)