



# Union boss probe push

## Senate deal questions raised

**SUE NEALES**  
Chief Reporter

THE federal Liberal Opposition has called for a 2007 Australian Federal Police probe to be reopened into allegations Tasmanian unionist Kevin Harkins may have broken national electoral laws.

Tasmanian Liberal senator Eric Abetz said yesterday the Australian Electoral Commission must reinvestigate the circumstances surrounding the decision by the union leader in August 2007, to drop out of contesting the seat of Franklin for Labor.

The renewed interest in Mr Harkins follows his revelations on national television on Tuesday night that Labor powerbrokers had helped convince him to stand down in August 2007 as the preselected Labor candidate in Franklin.

Mr Harkins said he was told in 2007, with Mr Rudd's knowledge and approval, that if he quit he would not be opposed in any later efforts to stand.

But Mr Harkins said this commitment was broken last week when Mr Rudd acted to



**QUERY:** Kevin Harkins

dump him from the safe No. 2 spot on Labor's upcoming Senate ticket in Tasmania.

Senator Abetz said the revelation that Mr Rudd's former chief-of-staff David Epstein had given Mr Harkins a commitment must be investigated.

The commission started to investigate Mr Harkins' sudden decision to quit Franklin after the *Mercury* reported in August 2007 that Labor powerbrokers had offered him an elevated union position, more pay and a clear run at the Senate in the future if he "voluntarily" stepped down.

It is illegal under the Australian Electoral Act for anyone to offer inducements, money or benefits that could influence or

encourage a candidate taking part in an election to quit.

The maximum penalty is a \$5000 fine and/or two years in prison.

In 2007, Mr Harkins denied to the media and federal police that his decision to resign from the Franklin race had been the result of national deal-making by Labor powerbrokers.

Senator Abetz said yesterday that Mr Rudd needed to explain what deals were done relating to Mr Harkins' bid this year to seek preselection.

"Clearly under electoral rules it is illegal to influence potential candidates through inducement which may affect the outcome of an elected position," he said.

But Mr Harkins said yesterday: "There was no deal or offer that I would be assured of a Senate seat [if I dropped out]."

"The negotiated position was a commitment that if I was to run for a federal position in the future, whether in the House of Representative or Senate, that I would be able to go through the local preselection process without interference from outside."

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