



Tabled by
senator McKenzie
22/5/17.

Labor fund-raiser

Fair Work expert panel member linked to \$1000-a-head event

Harcourt 'breached' code of conduct

Mathew Dunckley

The Fair Work Commission's embattled panel of independent experts is embroiled in a new controversy after economist **Tim Harcourt** apparently breached the tribunal's code of conduct.

The *Australian Financial Review* has obtained a flyer for a February 20 event promoting a \$1000-a-head "Fund-raiser" for Labor MP **Matt Thistlethwaite** which lists Dr Harcourt as a guest speaker. The event also featured opposition trade spokeswoman **Penny Wong** and was described as lunchtime roundtable on the Trans Pacific Partnership.

Dr Harcourt was appointed as an expert to the tribunal last year by then workplace relations minister **Bill Shorten**. The commission's code of conduct says it is "expected" that members will not be involved with political parties and that "political fund-raising events, should be avoided".

A spokeswoman for the commission confirmed the code of conduct also applied to expert panel members.

Dr Harcourt said he was not aware that the event was a fund-raiser or that attending a fund-raiser was a breach of the commission's code. "As far as I know it was a trade policy information session, that is what I understood it to be. I have done trade events for all parties," he said.

Dr Harcourt, who was appointed as Austrade's chief economist by the Howard government, said Foreign

Affairs Minister **Julie Bishop** had recently launched his latest book and that he had spoken at a number of events organised by senior figures on the conservative side of politics.

Dr Harcourt's said complaints against him were "part of a campaign to undermine the commission".

Liberal Party Senator **Helen Kroger**, who has previously raised concerns about Dr Harcourt's independence, said his links to the fund-raiser were "very troubling". "What's the point of having a member's code of conduct when people like Dr Harcourt are bla-

tantly breaching it," she said.

An experienced industry source said the fund-raiser issue was not of great concern. "I wouldn't make a big deal of it," he said.

Dr Harcourt was one of six experts appointed to the commission to work on the minimum wage case and review default superannuation funds.

Dr Harcourt was initially assigned only to the minimum wage case but was then put on the superannuation case after two members stood down over conflicts of interest.

It appears unlikely Dr Harcourt would face any sanction for a breach. Commission president **Iain Ross** told a Senate estimates hearing two weeks ago that the code was a guide for commissioners but he had limited capacity to do more than counsel members who breached the code.

"It is simply a guide," he said. "It has no status. The Act sets out very clearly the bounds of my powers in relations to member discipline. They are very, very limited." Dr Harcourt's breach of the code of conduct is the latest setback for the important panels. Two members of superannuation review, **Vicki Allen** and **Steve Gibbs**, had to stand down earlier this year over their links to industry superannuation funds.

