



Designer asked Bishop to help with tax debt

EXCLUSIVE

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EMBATTLED fashion designer Johanna Johnson asked Foreign Affairs Minister Julie Bishop to help her delay her tax obligations, but the celebrity dressmaker's star client claims she refused.

In what is set to become one of Sydney's nastiest legal battles, the NSW Supreme Court this month ordered Ms Johnson's business to be wound up after failing to settle a \$1.1 million tax debt.

At least a dozen staff say they are also owed wages and superannuation, with former head of production Alana Teasel enlisting leading insolvency barrister Hugh Somerville to recover more than \$35,000.

In the battle to recover debts, questions are being asked over who knew what about the designer's finances.

One staff member has

claimed Ms Johnson had an email exchange with Ms Bishop early last year concerning a letter to be sent to the Australian Taxation Office, requesting a deferral of payment of her tax debt.

When asked about such a letter, Ms Bishop revealed she had been asked by Ms Johnson to help her pay the bill, but denied having any contact with the tax office. Ms Bishop's office said the minister was often asked to assist in resolving disputes.

"Ms Johnson sought this assist-

ance in an effort to meet her tax obligations while continuing to operate her business," it said.

"However, Ms Bishop did not become involved in resolving the dispute and at no time was there any direct contact between Ms Bishop and the ATO, nor has there been any request for preferential treatment for Ms Johnson."

Ms Bishop has been a vocal advocate of the celebrity designer. In January last year, Ms Bishop wore one of Ms Johnson's gowns at the Australian American Association's gala dinner. At the annual June Canberra Midwinter Ball, Ms Bishop wore a handmade couture beaded Johanna Johnson dress.

Ms Bishop later forged an unlikely

partnership between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australian fashion industry, with a memorandum of understanding to help promote the nation's creative talent overseas.

Ms Bishop reportedly asked the Australian Consulate-General in Los Angeles Karen Lanyon to include Johnson's gowns in the Australian Fashion Showcase Runway at G'Day USA last year. She wrote: "Johanna Johnson is a national asset to Australia — she is hard working, persistent and fearless. Her creative and innovative spirit encapsulates the enterprise of the Australian people that has made our country one of the most dynamic on earth."

MPs are required to list any gifts from "official sources" of more than \$750 and \$300 on the pecuniary interest register. However, gifts from "personal friends" given in a "purely personal capacity" are exempt unless deemed a conflict of interest.

When asked if Ms Johnson's dresses were gifts, on loan or purchased, Ms Bishop's office said she had complied with "the requirements of the Register of Interests".



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One of Johanna
Johnson's
wedding
dresses from
her spring 2016
collection.