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Union and Labor Party links test GetUp! 'independence'

BRAD NORINGTON

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Labor leader Bill Shorten with candidate Susan Templeton (far right) and members of GetUp! in 2016.

12:00AM AUGUST 12, 2017 • NO COMMENTS

Bill Shorten's afterparty on election night in November 2007 started at the Maribyrnong Park Bowls Club in Melbourne's northwest.

It was high spirits all around: celebrating victory for Labor, led by Kevin Rudd, and for Shorten as a first-time local MP.

A Nine Network reporter on the spot introduced the new Labor member for Maribyrnong to Ray Martin, back in the tally room, as a rising star. "He's even been touted by some as a future prime minister," he said.

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Soon after 10.30pm, the rising star made his farewells to the gathering in Moonee Ponds and took a car to the city.

Now at the Imperial Hotel, a mecca for political junkies at the top of Bourke Street, the party really got started. “Hey, stick around,” Shorten told a few tired campaigners. “We’ve got a crowd from GetUp! coming.”

THE TIES THAT BIND LINKS TO GetUp!



BILL SHORTEN

Federal Labor leader, big donor of union funds for GetUp!’s 2005 launch as head of the AWU, founding GetUp! board member



SKYE LARIS

Former GetUp! campaign director, partner and former chief of staff to Labor frontbencher Tony Burke



EVAN THORNLEY

Wealthy businessman, former Victorian upper house Labor MP, big donor of personal funds for GetUp!’s launch, founding GetUp! board member



TIM DIXON

Political director of New York-based advocacy group Purpose, set up by GetUp! co-founder Jeremy Heimans. Economics adviser for Labor prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, speechwriter for Rudd as PM, board member of Labor’s Chifley Research Centre



LACHLAN HARRIS

Founding staff member of GetUp!, former media adviser to Labor frontbenchers Wayne Swan and Robert McClelland, chief media adviser to Kevin Rudd as Labor PM.



SAM McLEAN

GetUp! national director 2012-15, joined Shorten’s staff as a political adviser in 2016



JOHN ROBERTSON

Former NSW Labor leader, former chief of Unions NSW, big donor of his union organisation’s funds for Get-Up’s launch



SIMON SHEIKH

GetUp! national director 2008-12, former ALP member, unsuccessful Greens Senate candidate in 2013 federal election



PHIL IRELAND

Chairman of GetUp!, Labor Party member, NSW convener of Labor Environmental Action Network, former operations director of NSW branch of union United Voice



CATE FAEHRMANN

Founding GetUp! board member, former Greens NSW upper house MP, chief of staff to Greens leader Richard Di Natale



AMANDA TATTERSALL

Co-founder of GetUp!, founding GetUp! board member, former Unions NSW organiser, former ALP member



DAVE NOONAN

Construction division chief of the CFMEU, an ALP affiliate, donated \$1.1 million of union funds for a GetUp!-authorised TV advertisement in 2010 attacking Tony Abbott over the abortion pill and treatment of women

Sure enough, a horde of excited young GetUp! volunteers arrived not long after, some wearing Team Shorten T-shirts, others the unmistakable orange of their GetUp! campaign brand.

Amid the euphoria, perhaps no one noticed or thought it mattered. But somewhere before this evening it seems the interests of Shorten as an ambitious Labor candidate and as a recently departed GetUp! board member and large-scale union donor to GetUp! had merged.

Two years earlier, GetUp! was launched as an “independent, grassroots, community advocacy organisation”. The idea of its founders, including Shorten, was to create a political organisation that, while progressive, would not be aligned with any party

and could attract the disengaged “middle” to political activism. Over time, GetUp! issues would be those that mattered to the group’s predominantly online membership.



Opposition leader and former GetUp! board member Bill Shorten. Picture: Kym Smith

On the night Shorten was first voted into parliament, quite probably there was a confluence of interests — well beyond Shorten’s pub party. The election result was a climax of Labor’s attempts to escape 11 years in the political wilderness of opposition, and of Shorten’s related quest for a safe seat that could propel his political career.

More broadly, it reflected the mood of the Australian electorate “middle” that had tired of John Howard’s government.

But was the motivation behind Shorten’s interest in GetUp! really to encourage independent community activism? Or was he a savvy, opportunist politician, keen to harness a nascent issues-based cause, and the enthusiasm it might generate among non-aligned millennials, to bolster his personal support?

Either way, Shorten’s experience with GetUp! points to lingering sensitivities for this organisation, now 12 years old but still battling away challenges to its credibility from critics who claim it is not independent and lacks a life outside mainstream progressive parties.

In the month of its August 2005 launch, then Liberal backbencher Andrew Robb claimed GetUp! was a “front for the Labor Party”. The group’s frontmen, co-founders Jeremy Heimans and Dave Madden, hit back by saying they had never been members of any political party.

Along with Shorten, the pair also emphasised the balance on the GetUp! board by stressing it included former federal Liberal leader John Hewson. More of that later — but the sledges did not stop that GetUp! was really a proxy for Labor and its union affiliates. And more recently, that the “front” extends to Labor’s hot-and-cold friends on election preference deals, the Greens.

When he was Liberal opposition leader in the Senate, Eric Abetz delivered a scorching scripted attack on GetUp! for “misleading claims to be independent” to a

2011 joint parliamentary committee inquiry into the funding of political parties and election campaigns.



Simon Sheikh, GetUp! national director from 2008-12 and unsuccessful Greens Senate candidate in 2013.

Abetz complained about GetUp! refusing to disclose its source for hundreds of thousands of dollars of union and other “start-up” money in 2005. He accused the group of hiding behind the cover that annual reporting of donations was not legally required until almost two years later.

The nub of the Abetz/Coalition argument was that GetUp! traded on the “perception” that it was non-partisan while other similar groups, left and right, made no bones about their status. “Third parties making political expenditures, be they trade unions, environment groups or business lobbies, are generally understood by the public to be representing particular interests,” Abetz said.

At this stage, Abetz and other Coalition senators had already lost a key battle over GetUp!’s status with the Australian Electoral Commission.

After the 2010 election, they had asked the AEC to review whether or not GetUp! operated “wholly, or to a significant extent, for the benefit of one or more of the registered political parties”, and therefore had a reporting obligation to lodge annual returns as an “associated entity”.

The AEC was unmoved. It concluded there was “still no information or available evidence” to show GetUp! met six definitions to qualify as an associated entity.

GetUp! has trumpeted this AEC finding on its website ever since. It has been a difficult result for the conservative side of politics to swallow. Some of the angst can be put down to sour grapes: while Abetz called GetUp! “grubs” for a campaign that ousted Tasmanian Liberal Andrew Nikolic in last year’s federal election, there appears to be grudging admiration among others in the party for a ground game that outgunned them in a supposedly safe seat.

Yet even some on the Labor side, worried about an opaque, distorted and sometimes corrupt political donations system in Australia, are willing to join their Liberal counterparts in arguing that all of it needs cleaning up.

It's a fact that GetUp! has never advocated support at elections for parties other than the ALP — or the Greens.

One senior Labor figure says: “I think they do a good job, but to pretend they are not an associated entity is a joke. If the Libs did that, we'd run hard on it.”

It's also a fact that GetUp! has a record of Labor identities serving at its senior levels, from former national director Sam McLean, now working for Shorten, to current chairman Phil Ireland, who is also active in the ALP (see graphic).

GetUp! has been funded to a large degree by groups associated with Labor, beyond its base of small individual donors. National director Paul Oosting continues to rebut claims that GetUp! “to a significant extent” serves to benefit Labor.



Skye Laris, former GetUp! campaign director and former chief of staff to Labor frontbencher Tony Burke.

The first executive director of GetUp!, Brett Solomon, revealed in a candid moment for an article published by *The Monthly* in October 2010 that serious consideration was given to turning the power of GetUp! into a Labor campaigning machine.

“I mean, if the big way to help Australia is to put in a Labor government, why the hell are we not just doing that?” he asked. “We could have got hundreds of thousands of people, and their friends, to vote Labor.”

Shorten has backed GetUp! to the hilt from the start. It was Shorten, as national and Victorian branch secretary of the Australian Workers Union, who agreed to be the “only union donor” for GetUp! in 2005 by providing seed funding of about \$100,000, and possibly much more.

Shorten's big union donation has been confirmed to *The Weekend Australian* by senior AWU and GetUp! sources for the first time.

Strangely, Shorten has not wanted it to be known that he endorsed giving any AWU members' money to GetUp! — despite his prominent role as an original GetUp! board member and spruiker in the media.

Interviewed on the ABC's *7.30 Report* to coincide with the 2005 GetUp! launch, Shorten said the activist group would be a worthwhile venture if it attracted

thousands of people disengaged from the political process: “If it doesn’t, you’d have to say we tried that but it doesn’t work here.”

While Shorten said nothing about AWU funding at the time, his sensitivity since then in refusing to confirm he did give the nod to the AWU’s funding of GetUp! surfaced during media coverage of the royal commission into trade union corruption in June 2015.

It emerged as a side story to another about how the Victorian AWU had agreed to trade off workers’ penalty rates as part of an enterprise deal in which the Cleanevent company agreed to pay the union \$25,000 a year.

The Weekend Australian’s Anthony Klan did some journalistic digging into a \$50,000 donation to GetUp! in July 2007 from the company that owned Cleanevent, Jagen Nominees. The donation came four months after Shorten had resigned from the GetUp! board as he prepared to contest the November election as a Labor candidate.

Klan reported how “concerns have been raised that the donation from Jagen to GetUp! may have been a donation to the AWU by proxy, given Mr Shorten’s links to GetUp!”. He also reported “the Victorian branch of the AWU’s unspecified support for GetUp! before donations were required to be declared”. He reported that Cleanevent was “involved in alleged sweetheart deals with the Victorian AWU at the time”.

Melbourne’s Liberman family, owners of Jagen and previously Cleanevent, refused repeatedly to respond to written questions from Klan, including why the \$50,000 donation was made to GetUp!

Unrelated to the Jagen donation, the AWU was thanked by GetUp! in its first 2005-06 annual report when Shorten was both AWU national and Victorian branch secretary, as well as a director of GetUp!



GetUp! national director (2012-15) turned Shorten adviser Sam McLean. Picture: Dan Himbrechts

Shorten and GetUp! refused to comment to Klan on the nature of the AWU’s support. Was the sensitivity related to the size of the donation? Was it because Shorten was, by 2015, the man who could be Labor’s next prime minister?

The Weekend Australian is not suggesting Shorten has done anything illegal or inappropriate. Some issues remain unclear, however, despite new confirmation of the AWU's substantial GetUp! contribution when Shorten was in charge.

The initial donation of about \$100,000 came from the AWU's national office. Under the union's rule No 57, a loan, grant or donation cannot be made unless approved by the national executive.

Several members of the AWU's national executive from that time confirm that Shorten sought a donation of at least \$100,000 for GetUp! in 2005 — and that this amount was provided.

Others recall it was discussed but have no memory of a vote. The AWU's current national secretary, Dan Walton, was asked repeatedly this week for details. He said he would ask an office financial manager to check internal accounts, including national executive minutes from 2005-06, where the GetUp! figure would be recorded if approved. He later said that his office was encountering difficulties in obtaining the information.

One former senior AWU official tells *The Weekend Australian*: "Bill put in 100k. He was on their board." Another says he recalled the AWU national office giving GetUp! at least \$100,000, possibly much more, at Shorten's request. He believes the AWU funds came from donations, but funding also possibly came from operating - expenses.

According to filed financial reports, the AWU national office's donations when Shorten was in charge totalled just \$1900 in 2004. They rose to \$37,000 in 2005 and hit \$94,000 in the 2006 financial year, during which the GetUp! donation was made.

Donations made by the AWU's Victorian branch, also headed by Shorten, peaked at \$83,000 in the same year after totalling \$17,000 in the previous 12 months.

Another former AWU national executive member says he remembers Shorten discussing a proposed donation to GetUp! but he cannot remember the sum, or if it was approved. "It's got to be put past the union national executive, and that would have caused robust debate if it was suggested," he says.

Two others concur with this view. Another recalls GetUp! funding was raised by Shorten at an AWU national executive meeting in 2005. "Bill had a habit of raising things and then you'd find out about it later," he says.

The Weekend Australian asked Shorten to comment on why the AWU donated a large sum of union members' funds to GetUp! when he was in charge, and whether he recalled if those funds were donated under rule 57 requiring approval of the AWU's national executive. The Opposition Leader was also asked if he recalled any funds to GetUp! going through the AWU's Victorian branch, or if the funds came from the national office only. Almost seven hours after Shorten's office received the questions, the Labor leader did not offer his recollections. Instead, a spokesman for Shorten said that he did not have that sort of historical information at hand, adding: "You'd have to ask AWU."

Others are not so coy about the seed funding for GetUp! John Robertson, as head of Unions NSW — a state union council, so not a union as such — has always been upfront that he contributed \$50,000 from his organisation. Robertson, who later became NSW opposition leader, was the first donor to GetUp! in December 2004 — eight months before its official launch. He recalls that GetUp! had four main seed donors including the AWU.



Tim Dixon, political director of advocacy group Purpose, set up by GetUp co-founder Jeremy Heimans.

Sources familiar with the initial funding for GetUp! say wealthy hi-tech entrepreneur and former Victorian Labor MP Evan Thornley provided more than \$100,000. Thornley concurs but cannot recall the precise figure.

Joe Skrzynski, the chairman of CHAMP Private Equity and former SBS chairman, is said by GetUp! insiders to have been an early donor, giving around the same sum as Thornley.



Founding GetUp! board member Evan Thornley.

It has become GetUp! folklore — even mentioned by Wikipedia — that US-Hungarian investor and left-wing philanthropist George Soros injected a big wad of cash to help start the group.

Soros backed a similar US activist organisation, MoveOn.org, which has links to the Democratic Party. The two Australian-born founders of GetUp! did work for Soros-backed advocacy groups in New York, and still do.

But sources familiar with the seed funding for GetUp! say claims that Soros was one of its start-up benefactors are false. It is possible, however, that Soros has indirectly contributed money since then by channelling funds through Avaaz, an “international campaigning outfit” started by Heimans and Madden in 2007. Avaaz has given almost \$200,000 to GetUp! in recent years. Despite spreading his wings aboard with Madden, Heimans has remained a GetUp! board member.

The creation of GetUp! was the result of a homecoming and series of events that galvanised its founders into action on starting a permanent campaign organisation that involved the wider community in progressive political issues.

Heimans, a bright young Australian, had experience with the Soros-backed MoveOn.org in New York. He also headed another group in the US with Madden — Win Back Respect — that used crowd-funding to campaign against the re-election of George W. Bush in November 2004.

When Heimans returned to Sydney a month after the presidential election to visit his family, he met Amanda Tattersall, an organiser from Unions NSW with a deep interest in community campaigning.

Just as politics for left-leaning groups was at a low ebb in the US after the defeat of Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, so it was in Australia: Labor under Mark Latham had suffered a bad defeat in the 2004 federal election, handing John Howard control of both houses of parliament.



Founding staff member of GetUp!, and former media adviser to Labor frontbencher, Lachlan Harris.

Heimans and Madden joined Tattersall in co-founding GetUp! based on the MoveOn.org model.

After Robertson, Thornley, Shorten and Skrzyński helped with early funding. After GetUp! was launched in August 2005, its first “Now you answer to us” campaign urged a growing band of online supporters to message Coalition senators with the warning that they were being watched, and their “absolute power” would be held accountable.

Other early GetUp! campaigns were unveiled on media ownership laws, student unionism, the abortion drug, ABC funding, climate change and offshore detention of asylum-seekers. But it was the campaign to free David Hicks from US imprisonment at Guantanamo Bay that most boosted its public profile.

GetUp! churned through a series of overworked staff, many with Labor connections. When donations were disclosed after 2007, GetUp! stressed it was funded mainly by small individual donors — but there were big ones in the background too.

Unions donors included the Community and Public Sector Union (\$50,000), the Australian Services Union (\$35,000) and the Australian Education Union (\$40,000). The biggest GetUp! donation came from the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union just before the 2010 federal election when it gave \$1.12

million that was earmarked to fund a TV ad attacking Tony Abbott’s “archaic” views on women. GetUp! said it always intended to run the ad, but the funding vastly expanded its exposure.

The ad, authorised by GetUp! during an election campaign (with no mention of the CFMEU, a Labor affiliate), escalated criticism that GetUp! was willing to run “shadow campaigns” on issues Labor would rather not touch.

The anti-Coalition position of GetUp! on asylum-seekers has been attacked for similar reasons: its campaign issues are picked by a small team, including people with Labor affiliations — yet Labor’s official position on asylum-seekers is little different from the Coalition’s.

The shadow campaign claim resurfaced during last year’s federal election when Shorten ran a “Mediscare” campaign for Labor and GetUp! spent resources arguing against hospital cuts — supposedly not a priority issue for its members, according to surveys. GetUp! targeted the seats of Peter Dutton, Nikolic and other Coalition right-wingers while a parallel operation by the ACTU focused on 22 separate marginal Coalition seats. Nikolic is gone and Dutton’s seat is now a marginal.



Former NSW Labor leader, and former chief of Unions NSW, John Robertson.

Oosting claims GetUp! remains true to its original objectives as a progressive group campaigning on issues its members care about. He says GetUp! is “fiercely independent”, “sets its own agenda” and “we don’t accept funding from political parties or governments”. In the last financial year, he says, a “full 97 per cent” of donations to GetUp! were smaller than \$100 each and came from individuals in Australia.

Still, much about the funding and operations of GetUp! seems opaque. Oosting says he supports greater transparency, regulation and scrutiny. GetUp! also goes above and beyond its disclosure requirements. But despite a willingness to be part of a donations regime change, Oosting appears to balk at the notion his group should stop receiving overseas money. He also did not answer a question seeking further detail on big seed donors.

GetUp! has continued to accept offshore money from Avaaz, Campact and Oak Foundation. Locally, big individual contributors have included board member Anne

Coombs, Amanda Lopez, the Norman Rothfield family and Tony and Maureen Wheeler.

Hewson was invited to join the GetUp! board in 2005 and his mooted participation was promoted with some fanfare. He initially agreed, encouraged by the idea that GetUp! was a “genuine attempt” to stimulate key issues. He was gone within weeks, harbouring doubts about its agenda and whether it would be a grassroots operation in practice.

Looking back, he believes GetUp! has transformed into an activist group with particular ends: “They see themselves as a political force with a specific agenda, but there’s not too much accountability about that. Their head pops up every now and again on an issue.”

Asked about whether it should be treated as an “associated entity”, Hewson says GetUp! is “now more ALP than they’ve ever been”. He suspects much funding came from unions.

“They have run a far more left-wing agenda in recent times, although some of it has been objective, such as the stuff on retail power operators,” he says. “If they have emerged as an associated entity to the ALP or unions, then that needs to be declared and publicly accounted for.”



Founding GetUp! board member Cate Faehrmann.

The bigger issue, Hewson believes, is to clean up all campaign funding, which he says should not be difficult if both major parties can agree.

Thornley, back to business and philanthropy and now far removed from GetUp! and ALP politics, says he supported the original GetUp! concept brought to Australia by Heimans and Madden to “win the middle” with a progressive organisation. The intention, he says, was always to attract seed funding from the business world to achieve scale, and then rely on membership funding.

Thornley says the risk for GetUp! was always that it might become an “echo chamber” for the left. He believes GetUp! was most successful when it pursued progressive issues that united its supporters rather than divided them.

Uniting issues included climate change, foreign policy and social justice. He questions the effectiveness of campaigning on some others: “If it’s just an echo chamber that resonates with the left, then you have to question whether it is effective, or symbolism.”

How does Thornley rate how GetUp! is working now? “Not as strongly as originally intended,” he says.

The assessment of another early donor is far more savage: “I think GetUp! has lost its way.”

BRAD NORINGTON, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Brad Norington is an Associate Editor at The Australian, writing about national affairs and NSW politics. Brad was previously The Australian’s Washington Correspondent during the Obama presidency and has been wor... [Read more](#)



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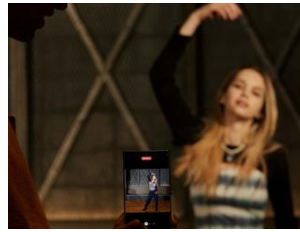


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