

MP Stuart Robert ‘a go-between’ in deal attempt with Dubai prisoner



Federal Liberal MP Stuart Robert. Picture: David Clark



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Federal MP Stuart Robert became the middleman in a bid to secure a statement from an Australian detained in Dubai over a soured property deal to help a Gold Coast developer and Liberal Party donor.

Mr Robert, dumped from the Turnbull ministry last year over links to donors, briefly acted as a broker in 2013 for Sunland boss Soheil Abedian to elicit a supporting statement from Australian Marcus Lee over a dispute involving the developer in Dubai.

At the time, Mr Lee and fellow Australian Matthew Joyce had been detained without trial in Dubai for almost four years after the developer gave evidence against them.

In early 2013, the Gold Coast MP acted as the intermediary between friends of Mr Lee and Mr Abedian, who purportedly offered to write a letter to prosecutors in Dubai to help secure his release in exchange for a statutory declaration from the Australian.

Just months earlier in parliament, the federal MP and friend of Mr Abedian had defended Sunland, which he described as a “solid Australian citizen”.

It has emerged that the speech was largely lifted from briefing notes supplied by Sunland’s then lobbyist Simone Holzapfel, who donated \$114,000 to Mr Robert’s fundraising entity in 2013.

Emails obtained by *The Weekend Australian* show Mr Robert and Mr Lee’s friend, Rosemary Adam, discussing the deal to secure a statutory declaration for the developer.

“I’ve spoken again to Soheil and he would like the statutory declaration please,” Mr Robert wrote on February 13, 2013. “Can I also sound a quick note personally that I think time is now running out for Marcus to have a bargaining chip, as it were.”

Mr Robert yesterday defended his involvement in the proposal, which didn’t go ahead after Mr Lee refused to be a “bargaining chip” or give a statement about dealings of which he had no knowledge.

“I was approached by a friend of Marcus (after the speech in parliament) and I acted as a postbox between the two parties; that was all I did,” Mr Robert said.

Mr Joyce and Mr Lee were released by the United Arab Emirates government in December 2013, after almost five years in jail and home detention over a property deal gone wrong.

Their case was tested in a parallel case in the Victorian Supreme Court in 2012, with a damning ruling against Sunland, which was found to have had a “wilful disregard of known facts”.

Official declarations show the Sunland Group donated more than \$35,000 to the Liberal National Party at fundraising events and in donations between 2013 and last year.

Mr Robert this week dismissed Labor attacks of “cash for comment” over his 2012 defence of Sunland after it emerged his speech in parliament was largely lifted from briefing notes supplied by Ms Holzapfel, a former longtime adviser of Tony Abbott.

Months after Mr Robert delivered the speech, Ms Holzapfel gave more than \$110,000 of her “own money” to Mr Robert’s fundraising entity, the Fadden Forum.

It was revealed by *The Australian* this week that Ms Holzapfel owed more than \$430,000, including \$355,000 to the Australian Taxation Office, when she donated \$114,000 in 12 separate payments in mid-2013, ahead of the federal election.

That donation in 2013 and Mr Robert’s bankrolling of “independent” candidates ahead of the Gold Coast council elections in March, as revealed by *The Australian*, are part of an investigation by Queensland’s Crime and Corruption Commission.

Ms Holzapfel has previously told *The Australian* the donations were her “own money” and rejected suggestions she had given the money to the Fadden Forum on behalf of clients.

“I donated because I wanted my former boss (Mr Abbott) to become prime minister, and that is my right to do,” she said then.

Mr Robert is now expected to be called to give evidence in a civil case that has been launched by Mr Lee against Sunland.