

# Rex Patrick takes aim at Alexander Downer over foreign consultant job

Shannon Jenkins – *The Mandarin* - 22 October 2020

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Former diplomat and foreign affairs minister Alexander Downer's new role working for the British Overseas Territory of Gibraltar has set a "dubious standard" for the conduct of ex politicians, according to Independent senator Rex Patrick.

The former high commissioner to the UK recently listed himself as a consultant "assisting the government of Gibraltar in its free trade agreement negotiations with Australia" on Australia's Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme [public register](#). According to the register, the appointment began in late August and will end in August 2023.

Patrick questioned the appropriateness of Downer's new role after it was discussed during Senate Estimates on Wednesday, arguing it "doesn't support Australia's national interests".

"It's not a good look for a former foreign minister to make himself available to help a foreign tax haven negotiate a favourable financial and taxation deal against Australia," he said in a statement on Thursday.

"Mr Downer's decision to become an adviser to a well-known international tax haven sets a dubious standard for the conduct of former Australian politicians, especially those who have had the great privilege of serving at the highest levels of Australian government."

Downer held the role of high commissioner to the UK from 2014 to 2018, and was the first to visit Gibraltar. Patrick noted that Downer visited Gibraltar four months before departing his London post, in December 2017. He also visited the territory earlier this month, according to his Twitter account.

The senator questioned the level of transparency surrounding Downer's consultancy work for Gibraltar, and whether he has contacted federal government ministers or officials as a result of it.

"One wonders whether Mr Downer consulted with his former colleagues Prime Minister Scott Morrison, foreign minister Marise Payne or trade minister Simon Birmingham before taking up this appointment, and if he did confer with them, what their response was?" he said.

"He is not currently listed on the Australian Government's Register of Lobbyists; nor is his company Tenjin Consulting which highlights 'FTA engagement and strategy' as a special area of expertise."

**Read more: [Tony Abbott rumoured to be UK's new trade envoy](#)**

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In August it was rumoured that former prime minister Tony Abbott had been appointed to the UK government's Board of Trade, with the appointment confirmed in September.

Earlier this month Abbott [added his name](#) to the foreign influence register, stating that he had joined the board as “an unpaid adviser”, and would “advocate for free and fair trade especially trade with the UK and its allies”.

Patrick argued that while Abbott’s appointment “drew much attention and criticism, Mr Downer’s low profile engagement with a jurisdiction that serves as an international tax haven and centre for online gambling deserves some scrutiny”.

“The financial and taxation status of Gibraltar will be part of Australia’s free trade agreement negotiations with the United Kingdom post-Brexit. Mr Downer’s consultancy is presumably intended to give the Gibraltar tax haven an edge in advancing its interests in negotiations with Australia,” he said.

“International corporate tax minimisation through profit shifting to offshore tax havens is a major problem that costs Australia billions of dollars each year — money that could otherwise be spent on schools, hospitals, infrastructure and national security.”

The Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme was [proposed in 2017](#) as a means of improving “visibility of the nature and extent of foreign influence over Australia’s government and political processes” and is run by the Attorney-General’s Department. Last year the AGD staff who manage the scheme [came under fire](#) after they asked Abbott to consider registering as an agent of foreign - influence because he agreed to speak at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Sydney.