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Wednesday 05 July 2006

THE AGE

AWA probed over fine for sick time

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Publication: The Age (11,Wed 05 Jul 2006)
Edition: Second

Keywords: **Workplace (2),John (2),Howard (2),Peter (1),Costello (1),industrial (2),Kim (1),Beazley (1),Andrew (1),Murray (1)**

THE Government's Office of **Workplace** Services is investigating claims that a 21-year-old mining worker, Lorissa Stevens, was bullied and sacked when she refused to sign an AWA containing the right to fine her if she did not give 12 hours notice of taking sick leave.

The latest embarrassing case comes as **John Howard** admitted yesterday that the longer a government is in power, the more enemies it makes. He was facing a bad opinion poll and fending off criticisms of Treasurer **Peter Costello** and the Coalition's **industrial** relations policy.

Office of **Workplace** Services director Nicholas Wilson said that "what has sparked our interest (in the Stevens case) is particularly the potential for people to be docked pay as a result of taking sick leave".

Opposition Leader **Kim Beazley** seized on the case, in which Ms Stevens could have been fined \$200 and had her pay docked under the AWA. She was offered the AWA after working briefly as a casual for Hunter Valley mining contractor Mining and Earth Moving Services.

"For **John Howard** to allow this to happen to our kids in this country is disgraceful," Mr Beazley said.

He said Mr Howard must face the voters over his **industrial** laws. "He will not be forgiven by ordinary Australians if he cuts and runs and squibs the next election."

Mr Howard said winning next year would be a "tough assignment" for the Coalition. "I've been saying for a year or more now that we must prepare for a very tough fight," he said, after Newspoll showed that Labor, leading 53 to 47 per cent on a two-party vote, would win an election held now.

On talkback radio, a caller told Mr Howard he voted Liberal but would find it hard to vote for Mr Costello. After praising Mr Costello, Mr Howard said: "The prime ministership is not vacant. I'm occupying it," then defaulted to his formula that he would stay as long as the party wanted.

Another caller told Mr Howard he was "a wonderful Australian" but she hated his IR laws. "But they are for the long-term benefit of the country," Mr Howard said.

Meanwhile, the Democrats' **Andrew Murray** yesterday released figures showing how the Senate's teeth have been drawn since the Coalition took control on July 1 last year.

Sixteen references to committees were voted down in the past year, compared with seven in the previous 12 months. One order for production of documents was agreed to; 25 in the year before. The number of bills guillotined rose from four in 2004-05 to 21 in 2005-06, while the time for committees reporting on bills fell from an average of 39 days to 27. Non-government amendments to bills went from 120 in 2004-05, to three in the year to June 30.

· Senator Murray, one of only four remaining Democrats in Federal Parliament, will not stand again at next year's election. He disclosed his decision in a letter to party members. Queensland Democrat Andrew Bartlett is the only sitting Democrat to publicly confirm he intends to run again next year, with Natasha Stott Despoja and party leader Lyn Allison yet to decide. -- With AAP

Caption :PHOTO: Lorissa Stevens: sacking claim.

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