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HD **A hint for dupes: follow the money**
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IN All The President's Men, the film that dramatised the journalism responsible for piecing together Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal, the informant known as Deep Throat told The Washington Post's reporters to "follow the money".

Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein still had to do all the hard yards. There were few short-cuts. Not much in the way of evidence came easily in their pursuit of a US president who would be accused of corruption and run out of office.

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In stark contrast, it should be ridiculously straightforward for curious journalists, political staffers, even members of the public to "follow the money", or at least embark on the trail, in Australia's current political scandal, featuring Clive Palmer in the case of the supposedly missing \$12 million.

The ABC's Tony Jones is an interviewer, not an investigator like Woodward or Bernstein, but the flagship program he presents (and on which Palmer loves appearing) has the staff and the resources to be properly informed by publicly available court documents about a very serious matter. A few hours after Palmer's appearance with former US vice-president Al Gore in Canberra, Jones put to him that "it seems to be an allegation made by your partners (Citic Pacific) that \$12 million has gone missing from ..." Palmer replied: "Well that's just not true. There's no allegation made by them. There's no action taken by them. There's no action against us in any of these matters. It's just rubbish." No allegation by the **Chinese**? No action taken by them? All those matters in all those court proceedings must be make-believe, too. Along with the large sums of money currently being spent by Palmer on lawyers to defend him in the same proceedings.

Serious questions revolving around who instructed withdrawals of \$10m in August last year and \$2.167m in September of funds that were the **property** of the **Chinese** government, from a Palmer-controlled National Australia Bank cheque account, called Port Palmer Operations (BSB 084 004 169393487) are being closely examined in the Federal Court, Queensland Supreme Court and in arbitration proceedings run by a retired Supreme Court judge, Richard Chesterman QC. Where was the money spent and why? Chesterman's probe to "follow the money" is zeroing in on documents that will answer these and many other questions. But Palmer's **company** isn't a model of co-operation.

The hard evidence of some of the documents available in these proceedings cannot be found on Twitter. A lazy internet search will be similarly unrewarding. If you ask Palmer or his PR stuntman, Andrew Crook, to explain where the money went, their distortions and deflections will continue to lead flagship programs such as the ABC's Lateline up the garden path and across to fairyland.

Jones asked: "Can you sort that out for the public because it's on the front page of the major newspaper pretty regularly, this allegation. I mean, is it time to put these accounts ..." Palmer: "Well, it's just The Australian." This is another Palmer decoy. The point is that these are not just newspaper allegations; they are based on evidence from Palmer's estranged partners, Citic Pacific, and its wholly owned subsidiaries which have developed a disastrous \$10 billion iron ore export project in Western Australia.

The hard evidence is set out in the court documents. It is in sworn affidavits and other filings in the Federal Court. The evidence is in the columns of certified National Australia Bank statements showing those two very large withdrawals — for so-called “Port management services” — during the Palmer United Party’s costly federal election campaign. Many of these documents are relatively easy to retrieve.

Evidence that those withdrawals were wrongful, according to the **Chinese**, is disclosed by the fact that Palmer’s **company**, Mineralogy, was contractually permitted to use the money only to cover costs in the running of a port. Mineralogy has not been running the port so it should not have had such expenses. In any event, it had never run up monthly expenses in the past of that magnitude.

The hard evidence is also in Supreme Court orders, made on Wednesday, requiring NAB to disclose details of all **transactions** of the cheque account. And the evidence is in damning courtroom statements in which Andrew Bell, SC, a Sydney-based **commercial** lawyer for the **Chinese** government-owned **company**, Citic Pacific, has questioned whether the missing funds bankrolled the PUP election campaign.

With the legal orders to the bank and other parties to produce documents in the next two weeks, the evidence is mounting, and ripening like low-hanging fruit.

Palmer denies all wrongdoing.

Jones again: “Well, the reports keep suggesting that the police are going to be investigating these matters.” Palmer: “Well what police? That’s just a lot of bullshit. So, people don’t like me because I’m in politics and I’m happy to say what I think and I won’t be intimidated by The Australian. It’s good for fish and chips, but not much else.” If the current court proceedings over this large pot of missing money reach a logical conclusion, however, there is likely to be a major police investigation. Palmer, as the ultimate owner of Mineralogy and the director at the time of the withdrawals, will be accountable for the **transactions** of his **company**.

With so much documentary material readily available in a case that the **Chinese** appear determined to see through to the bitter end, there is something seriously awry in politics and journalism when a self-proclaimed billionaire and powerful politician can get away with brazen falsehoods about indisputable facts.

The falsehoods by Palmer on Lateline, and elsewhere, are so ludicrous and easily rebutted that you wonder why he bothers. But we have been down this path before. This time last year, for example, he claimed that the **Chinese** were paying him \$500 million a year. After The Australian exposed this claim as false, he launched defamation proceedings in the Supreme Court. We’ll keep you posted if a fresh legal action lobs.

The lesson for journalists, many of whom are being made to look like inept fools by Palmer, is simple. Do your homework. Forget his media conferences and the PR stunts unless you have researched the detail and can maintain a line of questioning. When his track record shows he makes stuff up on a regular basis, it is journalistic irresponsibility to fail to question him with rigour.

Many years ago on the Nine Network’s Sunday Business program, finance journalist Michael Pascoe did his homework, and questioned Palmer without fear or favour. Pascoe remained calm while Palmer deflected, dissembled and, finally, ranted. While Palmer orchestrates a media circus and dodges the scrutiny that would be (and should be) applying to any other politician holding Australia’s balance of power, the hard evidence mounts up.

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