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Politician's outback adventure

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Given the many recent scandals over the discretionary expenditure of politicians, it is not unreasonable to hope for a heightened awareness of public expectations when making claims on the taxpayer. Yet most voters would judge Liberal MP Andrew Laming spending \$13,643 on flights for his wife and children to accompany him on a trip to the Northern Territory and Western Australia as excessive. Mr Laming, while not breaking the rules, has spent more than any other federal MP on family travel and significantly more than what was spent on travel for his staff during the same three-month period last year.

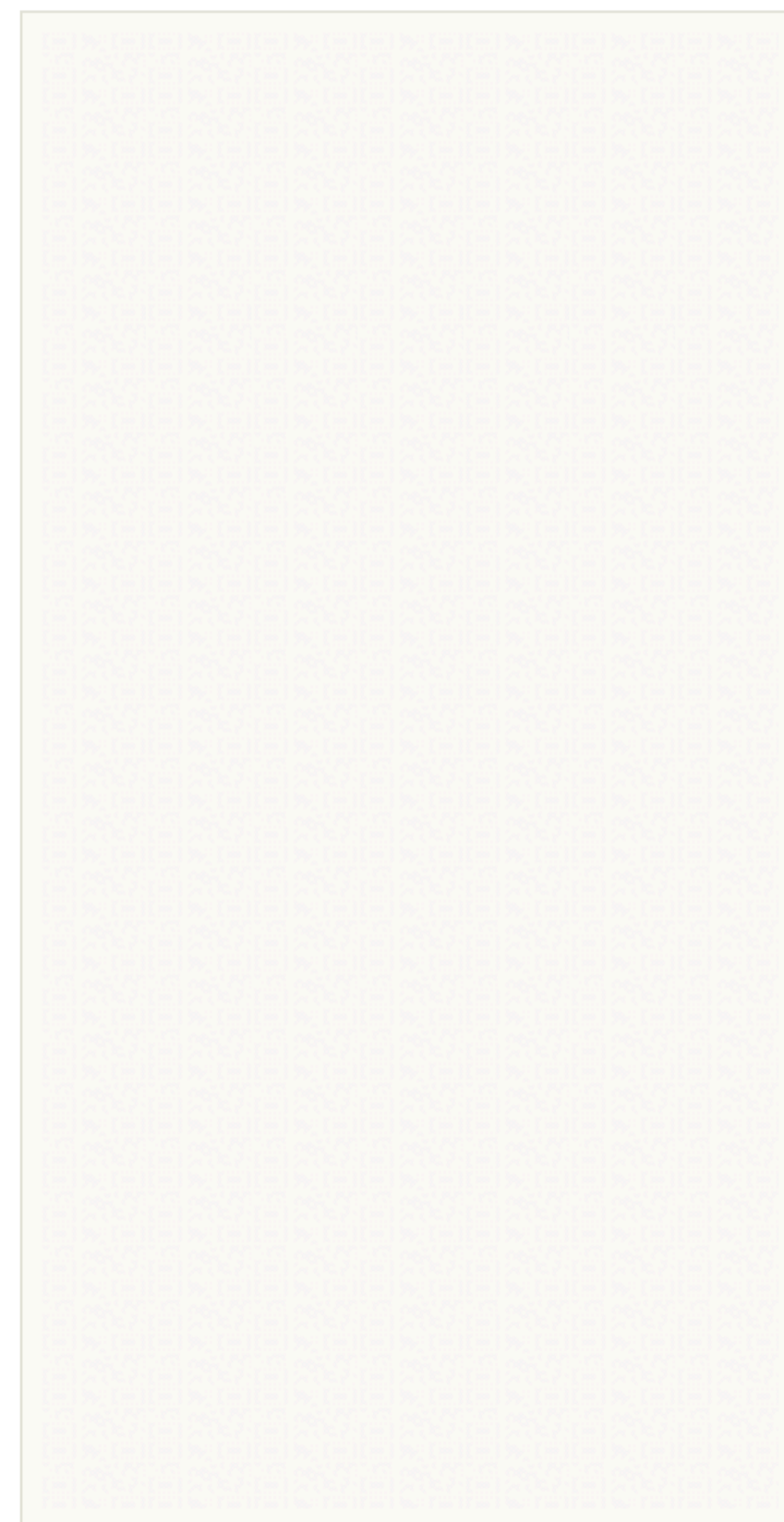
It is understandable that Mr Laming would like to spend more time with his family given the requirements of politicians to travel widely and spend almost half the year in Canberra. It is reasonable that we should afford them the opportunity to allow their families occasionally to travel with them, and also to Canberra. But we question whether Mr Laming needed to take his wife and daughters on a trip that saw them fly Brisbane-Townsville-Darwin, hire a car to drive to Kununurra, and fly business class Perth to Brisbane after a flight to Darwin was cancelled.

Mr Laming said he travelled with his family to Kununurra for NAIDOC Week, when they met indigenous leaders and visited an arts centre and school. The accommodation costs claimed by Mr Laming are yet to be declared publicly. It is admirable that Mr Laming, like some other politicians, tries to spend a week each year in an indigenous community. This enables him to gain a greater understanding of the conditions in which indigenous Australians live and how government could better tailor its policies to help. We wonder, however, if the indigenous community was perplexed to see a politician arrive with his family in tow, all charged to the taxpayer. During the visit to Kununurra, Mr Laming said he discussed the government's trial of the cashless welfare card. This may have struck them as somewhat perverse given they are being asked to focus their personal spending better in an effort to improve social and economic outcomes, and also reduce the burden on the budget. Mr Laming should have exercised better judgment.

This example highlights an expenses system that, as we report today, is expected to cost \$29 million to operate across the next four years and is in need of further reform. The government has made some changes. But it would make sense for there to be a monetary cap imposed on all MPs for family travel. While there is scope for limiting what politicians can spend and claim reimbursement for, it is also up to the politicians to exercise better judgment in line with community expectations. Many politicians have been more sensible in their use of family travel in recent times. It is worth noting that most politicians, 58 per cent, did not spend any money on travel for family members in the same period. We could do with more of this self-regulation.

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