

**THE AUSTRALIAN****Taxpayer picks up Liberal Andrew Laming's \$13,000 travel bill**

Liberal backbencher Andrew Laming with wife Olesja in Brisbane.

RACHEL BAXENDALE THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM January 4, 2018

Liberal backbencher Andrew Laming has charged the taxpayer more than \$13,500 for his wife and daughters to accompany him on a week-long trip to the Northern Territory, including claiming more than \$3000 per person for business-class flights from Kununurra to Brisbane via Perth.

The sum is almost double the \$7800 Mr Laming spent on his staff members' travel over the three months from July to September 2017, and more than any other MP spent on family travel over the period.

Mr Laming's eye-watering bill comes as 132, or 58 per cent, of the 226 federal parliamentarians claimed nothing for family travel, indicating that although it is within the rules, many have come to recognise such expenditure of taxpayers' money is not viewed favourably by the public.

A former ophthalmologist who was the Abbott opposition's spokesman for regional health services and indigenous health, Mr Laming has not held a frontbench position since 2013. He said he had visited Kununurra for NAIDOC Week, to meet indigenous leaders, and health, education and social service providers, attend an indigenous literacy launch and discuss the trial of the cashless welfare card in the East Kimberley community, which is 3600km from his seat of Bowman in Brisbane's east.

Mr Laming declined to comment when asked why it was necessary for his wife Olesja and daughters Sophie-Claire and Isobel, now aged nine and five, to join him on the trip. However, he blamed the unforeseen cancellation of a flight from Kununurra to Darwin and alternative re-routing through Perth for the exorbitant cost, saying he was one of the least-travelled federal MPs.

"Remote policy work is part of the job; in this case attending a literacy launch to preserve indigenous language and understanding the unique challenges of remote welfare quarantine," he said.

Crossbench senator David Leyonhjelm said he did not have much sympathy for politicians "taking your kids on a taxpayer-funded holiday".

"In fairness, a lot of politicians have poor family relationships so I suspect the family travel allowance was brought in as a consequence of that, and I do have some sympathy for those who live a long way from Canberra and those with very young children," Senator Leyonhjelm said.

"But I use the business model as a yardstick and it would be very rare, unless you were a CEO, for this sort of travel to be allowed."

In January last year, Sussan Ley was forced to step down as health minister after it was revealed she had made 27 taxpayer-funded trips to the Gold Coast in recent years, using one to purchase a \$795,000 apartment and another two to attend New Year's Eve celebrations.

Mr Laming said he tried to spend a week in an indigenous community each year — with visits to Cape York and Ramingining over the last three years — and his family usually accompanied him.

Since July 2014 Mr Laming has claimed \$48,884.78 for family travel, predominantly for the remote area trips and weekends in Canberra during sitting periods.

Mr Laming's Kununurra trip involved claims for flights for his family from Brisbane to Townsville, where he met them at the airport, having arrived from an earlier trip to Papua New Guinea to observe the nation's election.

The family then flew on to Darwin, where they spent the night, before hiring a car and driving to Kununurra, with overnight stops in Katherine and Timber Creek.

The Lamings spent four nights in Kununurra, and flew back to Brisbane via Perth, at a cost of \$3253.65 per person, after their flight via Darwin was cancelled.

“The costs associated with the sudden cancellation of a Kununurra-Darwin service by Qantas was unknown at the time,” Mr Laming told *The Australian*.

“In this exceptional and unforeseen circumstance, re-routing via Perth was the only available alternative, and consistent with all travel rules.”

Mr Laming said he had claimed travel allowance for most if not all nights, meaning the total cost of the trip, including his own flights, will likely come to more than \$21,000 when the details of his travel allowance claims are made public. A prodigious user of social media, Mr Laming’s only post during his time in Kununurra bemoaned a sign in the local Coles celebrating Ramadan.

Ian Trust, chief executive of Kununurra-based indigenous organisation the Wunan Foundation, which facilitated Mr Laming’s visit, declined to comment whether Mr Laming’s travel claims for his family were appropriate, but said he welcomed the politician’s interest, and particularly his support for the cashless welfare card.

“We want as much support as we can in Canberra from both sides of politics, so from that point of view his visit was quite handy,” Mr Trust said.

Other big spenders on family travel during the third quarter of last year included West Australian Liberal Melissa Price, who holds the northwestern WA seat of Durack, and claimed more than \$13,000 for her partner, Brad Bell, to accompany her on trips to Perth, Canberra and around her vast electorate. Ms Price did not respond to questions regarding her claim.

Queensland Liberal senator Ian Macdonald, who was a vocal critic of the abolition of the life gold pass travel entitlement for long-serving parliamentarians, claimed almost \$10,000 for his wife Lesley to accompany him in Canberra. “That was the original point of this allowance, to compensate for the fact that I’m thousands of kilometres away,” he said. “A lot of my colleagues don’t seem to want their wives around in Canberra, but I do.”

Other claimants of more than \$5000 include WA Labor senator Sue Lines and Queensland Labor MP Cathy O’Toole.

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