

RESPONSE TO FAIRFAX MEDIA – 25 October 2013

Questions from Fairfax Media

The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald have examined records relating to the use of VIP military aircraft for domestic travel by current and former ministers.

According to those records, VIP military planes were booked to regularly transport you and your staff between Melbourne and Canberra between 2002 and 2007.

Can you please answer the following questions from Fairfax Media.

1. 'Special circumstances' were required for these flights to be approved. What were the stated "special circumstances" that required these RAAF Special Purpose Aircraft to be booked?

2. The Department of Defence has confirmed that these aircraft should only be used when no other form of transport is available. Given the number of regular commercial flights between Melbourne and Canberra, do you believe the regular use of military aircraft for MPs was justified?

3. Do you believe the use of these flights may have been a breach of the stated guidelines relating to the use of private VIP military aircraft by MPs?

4. Many of the flights were booked under the code CABSPEC. The Defence Department has informed Fairfax Media that CABSPEC indicates "a group of cabinet ministers travelling for cabinet business together, in order to economise on costs". Passenger lists indicate that, on at least seven occasions, no other cabinet minister was aboard a CABSPEC. Can you please explain why flights were booked as such?

5. Flight records indicate that almost all of these flights flew empty from Canberra to Melbourne to pick you up, and then returned to Canberra empty after transporting you to Melbourne, at a cost to Defence. In some instances as few as two passengers flew on these VIP military planes. Do you believe the significant cost of these VIP flights to the taxpayer and the military budget was justified?

6. Prime Minister Tony Abbott has recently stated that, when in doubt, ministerial travel expenses should be repaid. Several members of the parliament have repaid past travel expense claims, including the Prime Minister. Will you also consider repaying the cost of these flights?

Response to Fairfax Media Questions

CABSPEC means “Cabinet Special” and refers to flights which were put on to fly Senior Ministers to Cabinet meetings from various capitals around Australia. It has been the practice of both Labor and Coalition Governments for decades.

The flights were booked in the name of a Senior Minister and were made available to Ministers, MP’s and staff coming to Cabinet in order of seniority. This saved money because otherwise the Government would have to pay for commercial flights to and from Canberra for all of these people.

These flights were expressly authorised by Cabinet guidelines. All VIP flights have to be approved individually in the office of The Minister for Defence in accordance with guidelines. The advantage to the Defence force is that it allows the Squadron to keep its flying hours up.

There is no suggestion whatsoever that these flights were unauthorised or related to anything other than parliamentary business. They were transporting Ministers to Cabinet meetings and MP’s and staff to Parliamentary sittings in a cost effective way.

We look forward to past Labor Ministers being asked about these issues.

Answers:

1. Cabinet Special
2. Yes. It was authorised by Defence
3. No
4. See above
5. Yes. It was approved by Defence, see above.
6. No

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