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Details of \$25m in Australian taxpayer-funded VIP flights to stay secret

Exclusive: Calls intensify for the federal government to fully explain why it no longer publishes the information

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• A Guardian Australia analysis of special purpose flights data for 2023 showed a \$767,716 bill for the foreign affairs minister, Penny Wong, and a bill of almost \$4.1m for the prime minister, Anthony Albanese. Photograph: David Gray/Getty Images

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The details of more than \$25m in taxpayer-funded VIP flights for Australian ministers and dignitaries will be kept secret, fuelling calls for the federal government to fully explain why it no longer publishes the information.

The government has cited national security advice for the decision to no longer publish the flight logs, but advocates have argued transparency provides a deterrent to improper use and “right now, it’s potentially open slather”.

A Guardian Australia analysis of data between 2021 and 2023 for what are known as special purpose flights data shows the total cost for using the defence aircrafts has risen to \$26.6m over the period, including \$10.3m in 2023 alone.

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Unsurprisingly, the largest bill in 2023 was from the prime minister, [Anthony Albanese](#), who spent more than 750 hours in the air at a cost of nearly \$4.1m. Albanese is followed by the defence minister, Richard Marles, who charged taxpayers \$1,915,094 in 2023 for 432.8 hours in domestic and international flights.

The governor general, David Hurley, charged \$908,397 for the year, followed by the foreign affairs minister, Penny Wong, whose bill was worth \$767,716.

Australian politicians special purpose flights in 2023

Politician	Cost	Domestic hours	International hours
Anthony Albanese	\$4,092,868	411.5	346.6
Richard Marles	\$1,915,094	164.9	267.9
Penny Wong	\$767,716	44.8	123.5
David Hurley	\$908,397	115.1	119.9
Pat Conroy	\$501,045	14.2	105.8
Jim Chalmers	\$480,901	36.6	79.7
Don Farrell	\$281,594	18.3	49.8
Tanya Plibersek	\$152,582	25	11.9
Katy Gallagher	\$35,975	0	8.7
Parliament Special	\$282,985	63.2	0
Linda Burney	\$210,473	50.9	0
Murray Watt	\$169,920	47.9	0
Madeleine King	\$108,337	26.2	0
Chris Bowen	\$95,105	23	0
Kristy McBain	\$87,249	21.1	0
Matt Keogh	\$69,055	16.7	0
Catherine King	\$64,514	19.2	0
Ed Husic	\$30,599	7.4	0
Tony Burke	\$21,916	5.3	0
Andrew Giles	\$20,675	5	0
Mark Dreyfus	\$20,262	4.9	0
Anika Wells	\$18,194	4.4	0
Peter Dutton	\$5,789	1.4	0
Bill Shorten	\$5,376	1.3	0

The cost for each hour is believed to be about \$4,600. The yearly totals for 2022 and 2023 surpassed \$10m, up from \$5.8m during the Morrison government's last full year in power during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2021, the former Coalition government paused the old reporting requirements - which published the dates, passenger lists and destinations of each flight - pending a security review.

Under the Albanese government's updated VIP flight guidelines, the full details are no longer released publicly. Instead, domestic and international flying hours, along with the full costs, are tallied up and attributed to each politician in quarterly updates.

Marles [said last year the changes](#) were as a result of national security advice. Concerns had been raised that releasing the data exposed patterns of behaviour that made politicians vulnerable.

“All that we do is consistent with security advice about not revealing patterns of behaviour, and patterns of life and all the trips that have been taken in relation to my work and those of other ministers of government are completely in accordance with the guidelines,” Marles said in December.

At a recent Senate estimates hearing, the Australian federal police commissioner, Reece Kershaw, said police were seeing “growing threats against parliamentarians” including increased reports of harassment due to “recent world events”.

Kershaw added that reports of harassment, nuisance, offensive and threatening communications against Australian parliamentarians has increased by 160%.

A government spokesperson said the Albanese government was “absolutely committed to transparency”.

“Our focus has been on ensuring that the government is held accountable for the use of a public asset and that any reporting balances the need for transparency with the need to meet security requirements,” they said.

“The changes made by the Albanese government have increased the frequency of reporting and ensure that the documents are readily accessible by publishing them on the defence website.”

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But the Greens senator David Shoebridge said the latest data offered “another 10 million reasons for far greater transparency on these VIP flights”.

“No one is saying there aren’t some good reasons to schedule and catch these flights when there are no reasonably scheduled commercial flights or to visit remote communities and facilities,” he said.

“The problem with secret flights is put up in lights when the number of flights balloons to pre-election levels without any clear explanation.

“VIP flights tend to increase in the immediate pre-election period when both government and opposition are hopping around the country, but this can’t explain the surge in 2023. To explain that we need transparency.”

Australian politicians special purpose flights in 2023

	Total hours - domestic	Total hours - international	Total cost
2021	844.2	1121.2	\$5,769,252
2022	1624.4	1292.5	\$10,497,201 (includes \$1m in election flights)
2023	1121.2	1113.8	\$10,317,262
Total	3589.8	3527.5	\$26,583,715

Rex Patrick, a former independent senator for South Australia, is fighting the federal government for its secret flight logs in the administrative appeals tribunal.

Patrick said it was “extremely unlikely” post-event flight details would cause a security concern, noting he could track the prime minister’s flights in almost real-time on most days.

“For over 50 years, governments have disclosed both the flight detail and manifest without incident. If the government wants to now suggest that there’s an issue, they should properly state their case,” Patrick said, noting the “secrecy requirement came into effect under the Morrison government”.

- This story was amended on 12 June 2024. An earlier version quoted Rex Patrick as saying special purpose flight logs had been disclosed for “over 70 years”. The correct quote is “over 50 years”.

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