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Public servants spent more than \$3.7m on domestic business class flights in a year

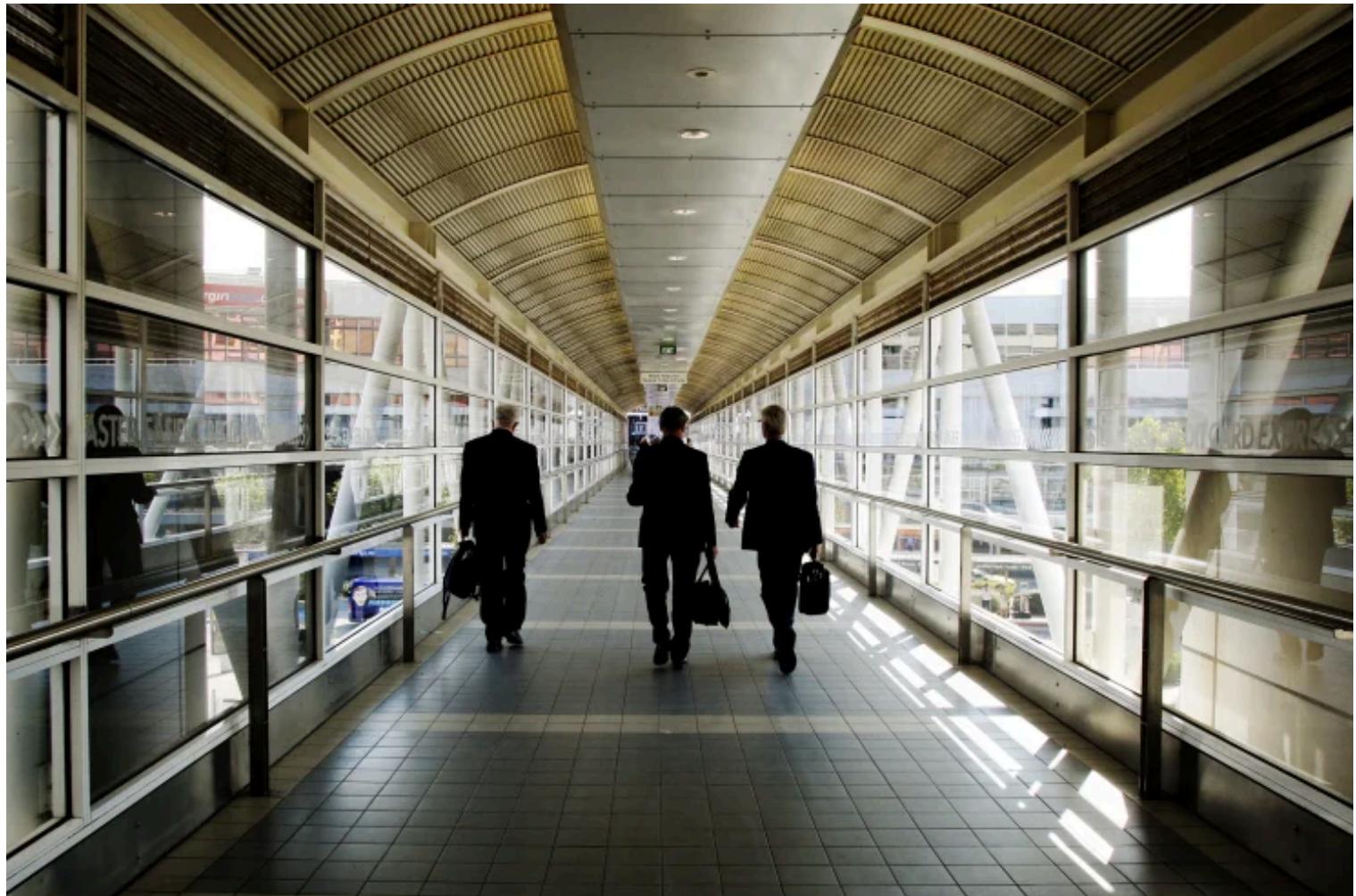


Anthony Galloway

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Senior public servants took thousands of domestic business class flights over the past year at a cost of more than \$3.7 million to the taxpayer, sparking calls for departments to tighten up their policies.

The fares included hundreds of trips between Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne, revealing the fact that there is no consistent policy for domestic travel across the Commonwealth public service.



Public servants are taking hundreds of business class flights between Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. PAUL ROVERE

Based on figures from 11 Commonwealth departments for the 2021-22 financial year, bureaucrats took more than 4000 [business class flights](#).

This masthead had applied for the figures from 14 government departments through Freedom of Information laws.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Veterans' Affairs the Department of Education did not release the figures by the statutory deadline.

Many of the fares were for longer haul flights to and from Perth, but hundreds were for flights that were under two hours.

One bureaucrat for the Department of Industry booked a flight between Canberra and Sydney for \$916.64.

The Department of Defence was the worst offender overall, with 2991 flights costing a total of \$2.6 million.

The policy for business class flights appears to differ considerably between departments.

The Department of Industry, the Department of Attorney-General and Treasury generally do not allow any of its staff to fly business class between Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra. But other departments don't have this restriction, with Defence allowing business class for its senior managers for any flight over 90 minutes.

All departments only allow staff who have the level of Senior Executive Services (SES) or above to fly business.

Former senator Rex Patrick said it was generally unreasonable for public servants to be taking business class flights that were under four hours.

"I don't think it's reasonable in any circumstance - other than perhaps for a minister or secretary who might be conducting work on the plane - to fly business class for those legs," he said.

"Most people would expect for a short 55-minute flight, people should fly economy."

During his almost five years as a senator, Patrick said he only ever took a business class flight on two occasions between Canberra and his home city of Adelaide because he was unable to get an economy seat.

Brian Marlow, president of the libertarian-leaning Australian Taxpayers Alliance, suggested major Australian businesses had tighter policies than government departments.

He said going business class on short flights such as Canberra-Sydney was not in line with community expectations.

"It's unacceptable, and public servants know this," he said. "Most people would expect public servants to treat their taxpayer funds with some level of respect."

He said some people might look at the figures as a "drop in the ocean" when compared to other government spending, but this "misses the point entirely".

"A public servant who is willing to burn through our money on unwarranted business class flights is the same public servant who will burn through our money by throwing it at other useless government initiatives," he said.

The figures released under FOI laws do not stipulate whether the fares were booked as a business class or upgraded from economy, and some departments did not include the departure and arrival cities in their data.

Asked what its policy was for domestic flights, the Department of Infrastructure said: “The class of fares for Senior Executive Service (SES) level employees within the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts is business class.”

The Department of Industry said all SES and above employees can travel business class “except on... short-haul flights” between Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra.

The Department of Defence said SES staff can book business class if “the scheduled flight time is for longer than 90 minutes at the time of booking”.

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CLARIFICATION — The Department of Prime Minister’s FOI documents incorrectly stated that a Canberra-Sydney business class fare cost \$4955.18, when in fact it was Canberra-Perth fare. The article has been updated to remove a reference to this fare.



Anthony Galloway is political correspondent for The Sun-Herald and The Sunday Age. Connect via [email](#).