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Fly-in, Fly-out for Photo Ops

Jo Coghlan, Dr, Southern Cross University
AUSTRALIANS have been told they are living beyond their means but federal MPs have clocked up a 27 per cent increase in private flights.

In many cases, MPs have used charter flights to take them to regional centres for one-day stopovers and photo opportunities.

The spike in charter travel over the past five years comes despite the growth of regional airports and domestic routes and upgraded highways.

When in government, MPs from both sides have used private planes to ferry them to Canberra instead of catching domestic flights. Before departing parliament, former Labor leader and Gillard-Rudd Cabinet Minister Simon Crean racked up more than $286,000 in charter flight claims in 2011 and 2012.

According to Department of Finance documents, Mr Crean travelled from Ballina to Wollongong and back home to Melbourne on a single day in mid-2012 costing taxpayers $27,500.

Fellow Labor MPs Tony Burke and Gary Gray, also cabinet members, made charter travel claims of $402,101 and $361,041 between mid-2008 and December last year.

In the same period, Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss — caught out by The Daily Telegraph last month boarding a charter plane from Port Macquarie to Sydney — claimed more than $204,000 on charter flights.

Green and Independent MPs have also made use of the generous entitlements scheme. While some regional MPs continue to use charters out of necessity, others have racked up huge bills.

Charters Towers-based MP Bob Katter has claimed more than $521,000 on charters, ahead of Nationals Deputy Leader Barnaby Joyce who lodged claims worth almost $380,000.

Southern Cross University politics lecturer Dr Jo Coghlan said MPs should organise their travel diaries more “effectively and strategically”. “Where they can use commercial flights, it should always be the first option.”