



24 July 2002



Senator Brett Mason
Chair
Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Senator Mason,

RE: INQUIRY INTO MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT (LIFE GOLD PASS) BILL 2002

Peter Andren M.P.
Federal Member for Calare

Please accept the following submission to your current inquiry.

Introduction

This Bill, and its accompanying outline and notes on clauses, illustrates all that is wrong with the entitlements system for existing and past MPs. It reeks of self-indulgence, and I can only surmise that the public servant charged with drafting the provisions would have almost choked on the task of detailing the excesses this Bill represents. There has been far more time and detail put into preparing this legislation than for other far more important bills (e.g. the Border Protection (Tampa) Bill of August 2001).

My basic argument, which is one supported by the vast majority of the electorate, is that such entitlements (better retitled privileges to put them in correct perspective) are unnecessary and an indulgence, and should be phased out.

Outline

The Bill's outline details the Prime Minister's announcement on 27 September 2001 that the "unlimited" access to travel for Life Gold Pass holders (who qualified prior to 1994) was beyond community standards and that the Government would legislate to limit the entitlements. It is a pity he didn't say he would abolish the entitlements, because they are an anachronism and a "perk of office" completely indefensible in modern Australia. I have detailed much of this argument previously in relation to other entitlements, particularly the Parliamentary Superannuation scheme, so I won't bore the committee with an argument they are no doubt familiar with. This argument, by the way, is one that has overwhelming community support and to continue to reject it only undermines the credibility of our representatives in the eyes of those they represent.

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Notes on Clauses

One can go anywhere in this section to find almost laughable contradictions.

Why do we adhere to the quaint “spouse” definition as *de jure* spouse? Surely in this day and age a *partner* should be included. To not do so is a sad joke and further underlines how far out of touch this system is with reality.

By detailing the reasons for such travel and defining “commercial purpose” again the Bill further underscores the fact the travel is simply a taxpayer-funded luxury. It will inevitably be of a purely recreational or personal pleasure nature. If such free travel was justified surely it should always be for *public duty*? But as the notes point out a “sitting fee” is paid for such public duties post-parliament anyway. Similarly “charity” appearances, to be truly classified as “charity” should surely entail the ex-MP “contributing” from his own pocket to the cause, or is there another definition of charity I haven’t heard of?

I believe there is ample room for manipulating these entitlements (privileges). A former Minister might fly from Sydney to Brisbane for ostensibly legitimate reasons, but then could also attend a board meeting of a company s/he may be a director of, check out some business details over four or five days and then fly home. The Pass therefore covers travel for what would obviously be commercial purposes.

Severance Travel for retired members is a junior version of the Gold Pass, and is equally indefensible. Why should a former MP enjoy such privileges at public expense? What special service has he or she given the community that a policeman, a doctor or any other committed person hasn’t also given?

The Notes on the Clauses of the Act provide further fuel for the legitimate protests about Parliamentary and Ex-Parliamentary *Privileges* that continue to bubble along in the Australian community. In Clause 11 Item 5 the term “under very longstanding arrangements” is used. This is the sort of terminology that riddles our system of entitlements and exposes them for the deceit they are. “Conventions” regarding use of entitlements during election campaigns, “conventions” regarding Travel Allowances and “arrangements” involving unlimited travel by widows/ers are all loosely applied terms with no authority and are part of a set of “rules” drawn up by the “club” members to which they apply.

Similarly the “pro-rata” adjustments are a device to ensure that every possible advantage down to the last dollar of taxpayer-funded value is squeezed out of the system. One would be excused for thinking that our Ex-PMs, MPs and their “spouses” had served Australia in war so exceptionally generous are these provisions.

Not even **frequent flyer points** are *obliged* to be used. Part 8 Clause 29 provides a “mechanism for treating travel” under the Government’s policy regarding the use of such points. But the ex-MP using the Life Gold Pass or

Severance Travel is, according to this clause able to “choose” to use frequent flyer points. The regulations state that “where possible” a Life Gold Pass holder “should ensure” frequent flyer points are used to cover the cost of further “official travel”. It does not state: “must ensure”.

Conclusion

There is perhaps an argument for ex-Prime Ministers to retain some of their privileges, but these need review. The lack of differentiation between commercial and public duties is nowhere near clear enough. To what degree are the activities of our surviving ex-PMs commercial or public and how can they be differentiated when they are conducted from the same taxpayer funded office and facilities?

Australians have a healthy disrespect for politicians. If we wish to bridge the divide and earn respect we could begin by considering how self-indulgent are the privileges this Bill invests in retired MPs. After all, MPs are people who volunteered for public life and who enjoyed an enormously privileged and well-remunerated position representing people who for the most part could only dream of post-retirement entitlements that politicians bestow on themselves.

The very time spent on this inquiry is an indulgence. We should be talking about extending Gold Health Card entitlements to those over 70 who both volunteered and were conscripted to a far nobler cause – military service on behalf of their country.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Andren', written in a cursive style.

PETER ANDREN
Federal Member for Calare