



Office of the Chief Opposition Whip

The Hon Gary Grey AO MP
Special Minister of State
Minister for the Public Service and Integrity
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600




Dear Mr Grey,

I write in response to your letter of the 4th September, in which it alleged that I may have been in breach of my charter entitlement on a trip to Laura on Saturday the 30th of June. I would argue very strongly against this claim and suggest that the situation raised is more about political mischief than a genuine concern about a misuse of public money.

The facts are as follows:

Firstly, I did charter a helicopter to travel from Cairns to Laura on the early afternoon of Saturday, 30th June. This is not unusual and I have made similar arrangements many times in the past – being a remote area, it was the only practical way of getting to the event in a timely manner. I travelled alone to Laura, David Kempton was certainly not on my flight, nor was there ever any intention to have him accompany me.

On arriving in Laura, I met up with a staff member who had travelled independently to the event. As I had a diary commitment in Cooktown the following afternoon, it was planned that she would travel with me to that function also.

Originally, I had enquired about continuing the helicopter charter the following day, to transport the two of us to Cooktown for the second event. However, the additional charter fee was well in excess of \$3000. I felt that rather than incur the significant additional cost, and knowing that there would be many people travelling on to Cooktown, I decided it would be far more practical and cost-effective to source a ride.

If you have any understanding of Laura, it is a small, predominantly indigenous community with one pub, a small general store, and a roadside café/fuel stop. There are no car hire companies, so no available rental vehicles, and it is common practice to rely on the goodwill of fellow travellers. While asking around to see whether I could source a ride, I spoke with David Kempton who had recently arrived to also attend the Laura event. He advised me that a staff member of his would be driving his vehicle to Cooktown the following day, adding that my staff member and I were welcome to travel in the same vehicle.

David Kempton also told me that he was intending to travel back to Cairns that afternoon and asked if I had any objections to him travelling in the empty chopper. I said that I had already utilised the charter and if the pilot was happy to carry him, back then I could not see any problem with that - as long as there was no additional cost to the Commonwealth. I understand that a query was then made with the pilot and David did ultimately travel on the helicopter.

In the meantime, I fulfilled my obligations on the afternoon and evening of the 30th, and the next day my staff member and I travelled as passengers with David Kempton's staff member to Cooktown. I subsequently picked up a hire car in Cooktown, attended the event, and the following day we flew back to Cairns on a scheduled air service.

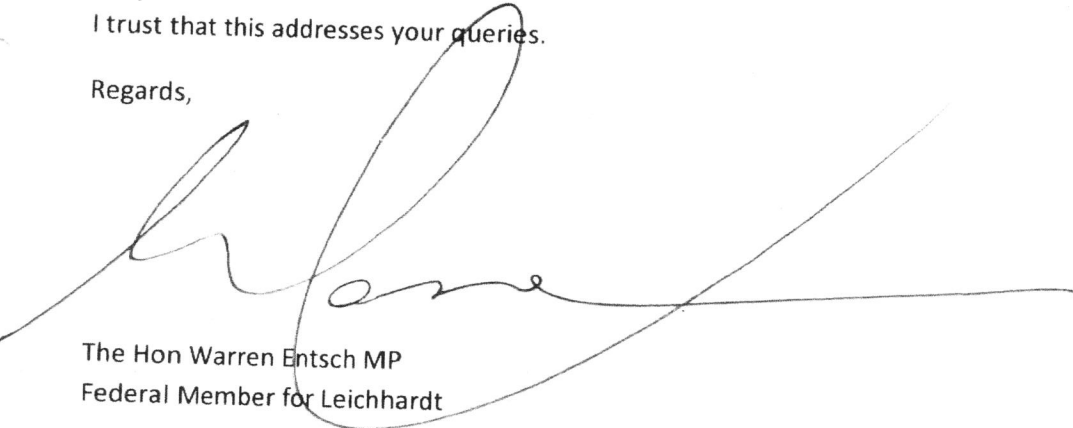
Minister, when travelling to remote areas it can be difficult to meet time frames so it is often necessary to use a little lateral thinking in order to fulfil obligations to the community. I do not believe that I have done anything inappropriate. The charter was always from Cairns to Laura, and it was always my intention that the helicopter travel terminated at Laura.

Minister, it certainly would have been more convenient for me to hold the helicopter overnight and travel to Cooktown the next day but given my objections as outlined previously I decided to use a bit of common sense and in doing so, saved the Commonwealth a significant amount of cost.

In signing off on my own travel, I believe that it was an accurate reflection of the situation in that I personally travelled alone on the charter. The fact that the original quote obtained was identical to the invoice that was ultimately sent clearly showed that there was no additional costs incurred.

I trust that this addresses your queries.

Regards,



The Hon Warren Entsch MP
Federal Member for Leichhardt

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