

Australian prime minister fails to stem Qantas upgrades scandal

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Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his key political lieutenants have spent most of the past week repeatedly and unsuccessfully trying to bury allegations that he secured multiple free upgrades from ex-Qantas boss Alan Joyce on personal flights, both domestic and international.

Ostensibly, the scandal was triggered by the release of *The Chairman's Lounge*, a book by former *Australian Financial Review* columnist Joe Aston. It said Albanese's parliamentary register of interests declared upgrades on about 20 personal Qantas flights between 2009 and 2019, while he occupied various positions including transport minister, shadow transport minister and official opposition leader.

Some flights were declared as "personally funded" or to destinations including Rome, London, Los Angeles and Honolulu. "According to Qantas insiders, Albanese would liaise with Joyce directly about his personal travel," Aston reported.

Revelations about politicians, including Albanese, receiving perks and privileges from the ruling class are hardly new. These ones go back more than a decade. Moreover, members of the political establishment have long lived in a very different world from ordinary people, especially those from the working class.

In 2021, for example, it was revealed that Albanese had accepted free tickets to seven Australian Football grand finals, seven years at the tennis Australian Open, four National Rugby League grand finals, two horse-racing Melbourne Cups and seven international cricket fixtures since 2009. He had also been given free entry to 23 concerts to acts such as U2, Prince and Adele as well as opera and theatre events.

In April?May 2023, as the WSWs explained, Albanese blatantly defended his seven-hour involvement in the \$1 million wedding of Sydney radio "king" Kyle Sandilands, a right-wing shock jock, amid an intensifying cost-of-living, housing and social crisis for millions of working-class households.

These were not aberrations. In February this year, Albanese joined a private party hosted by manufacturing billionaire Richard Pratt, where Katy Perry performed, just after obtaining expensive tickets to see a Taylor Swift concert.

Nor is Albanese alone. At least 90 percent of federal parliamentarians are members, especially invited by the

company's CEO, of the Qantas Chairman's Lounge, reportedly once described by Joyce as "the most exclusive club in the country." This gives them priority flight upgrades and luxury airport facilities, far away from the public. Among them are Liberal-National leader Peter Dutton and Greens leader Adam Bandt.

Virgin's equivalent airline lounge, known as Beyond, also gives politicians and other powerful figures a private club at airports, often offering showers, fine food and comfortable facilities.

These are just small slices of the corporate largesse enjoyed by the capitalist politicians, top public officials and corporate executives.

(All federal parliamentary politicians also have access to taxpayer-funded travel, including flights, for their parliamentary and political business. This includes flying to and from Canberra for sitting weeks, around their electorates for local business, or across the country to attend meetings and conduct ministerial duties).

So why have the Qantas allegations been given such prominence now and why has Albanese been incapable of burying them? Such scandals, heavily promoted by the corporate media outlets, are invariably mechanisms for executing political shifts.

Albanese's incapacity to put the charges to rest underscore two inter-related processes bound up with the increasing popular discrediting of the Labor government, on which the billionaire class has relied since May 2022 to suppress the deepening social discontent over falling living conditions and the plunge into US-backed genocide and war.

The first driving force is the widening of the already vast gulf between the entire political elite, whose mostly millionaire members are showered with corporate benefits, and the mass of working people, who are experiencing devastating financial and personal stress.

Even those workers and youth who can afford to fly, invariably do so crammed in what is known as "cattle class," mostly in planes operated by Qantas's budget airline Jetstar. Qantas is also widely hated for illegally sacking 1,700 workers at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite receiving huge government handouts.

The second factor is the increasing popular hostility toward the Labor government because of its imposition of the greatest cut in working-class living standards since World War II. That has been compounded by its assault on building workers through its dictatorial takeover of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union, and Labor's escalating support for US militarism, from the barbarism in Gaza, Lebanon and across the Middle East to the war against Russia in Ukraine and the AUKUS pact plans for war against China.

With media polls showing the Labor government slipping behind the openly right-wing Liberal-National Coalition in the leadup to a general election that must be held before May, there are growing signs that the capitalist ruling class is losing its confidence in Albanese's and Labor's ability to keep enforcing the program of war and austerity.

That anxiety has been heightened by the heavy defeats suffered by longstanding Labor governments in the Northern Territory and the state of Queensland in the past two months, but without any significant voting shifts in favour of the Liberal-National parties. This could be a harbinger of a widely-reviled Liberal-National taking office federally, only to be confronted by intense social unrest and political disaffection.

Such are the intimate relations between Labor politicians and corporate CEOs that it took Albanese and his office six full days before they issued a still-unconvincing denial that the prime minister had never communicated with the now-departed Qantas chief Joyce about seeking upgrades.

Publicly, Albanese still tries to portray himself as a battler from a poor family despite also buying a \$4.3 million cliff-top home with ocean views last month. In the anxious words of the *Australian Financial Review*, the spotlight on Albanese's personal hypocrisy "continues to cripple the government's attempts to show voters it is addressing their hip-pocket concerns."

According to that newspaper, multiple Labor Party "powerbrokers say there is no appetite to get rid of Albanese." He continues to enjoy the loyalty of "major players" both from his "left" faction and various "right-wing subfactions." They do not want a display of disunity, "especially so close to the election."

Nevertheless, there is "despair over his leadership, according to MPs, who asked to remain anonymous so they could speak candidly."

Some of the rumblings against Albanese were aired in the *Saturday Paper* today. An unnamed Labor backbencher commented: "The problem is that issues like this cut through, and the perception is growing that this is a bloke who can't say no to a freebie."

Another "Labor insider" said: "Albanese's love for a freebie is becoming a bit of an open secret. Whether it's VIP flights, sports tickets or rubbing shoulders at corporate events, he's starting to look out of touch with the needs of everyday Australians who are watching every dollar due to rising costs,

so he's got to be careful." Such perks made "us look disconnected from the people we're meant to be representing."

Speaking to the *Sydney Telegraph*, a Murdoch tabloid, one of Albanese's colleagues put it more crudely. "He's institutionalised and has worked out how to extract every bit of free s**t."

Another symptom that knives are possibly being sharpened against Albanese was the leaking of comments from Wednesday's full ministerial meeting, where he reportedly tried to dismiss the scandal as a media beat-up.

Health Minister Mark Butler sprang to Albanese's defence on Friday, Butler told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that ministers had to "knuckle down" and stop leaking from ministerial meetings. "It's ill-disciplined. It makes me cross," he said.

That is a sign of a decaying government.

Having taken office in May 2022 with the support of less than a third of voters, after falsely promising a "better future," the Labor government is desperate to retain the backing of the capitalist class as it not only cuts working-class living conditions but unveils massive military spending and turns Australia into a base for a disastrous US-led war against China.

Since 2022, the corporate elite has depended heavily on the Labor Party and its trade union partners to suppress workers' struggles and prepare the population for war. By seizing on Albanese's personal privileges as their primary target, the corporate media and the Liberal-National Coalition have only underscored the lack of any substantive differences. There is an essential unity between the country's two main ruling parties on the program of militarism and cuts to living standards.

As in the United States and internationally, a profound explosive political crisis is developing.



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