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Politicians trip up over travel, with a (jet) lag in declaring



Labor senator Deb O'Neill. Picture: AAP

EXCLUSIVE

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Three parliamentarians who took sponsored trips overseas last year have quickly updated their registers of interests after it was discovered they failed to declare within the required timeframe that they had accepted sponsored travel and hospitality.

Labor senator Deb O'Neill, Liberal senator David Van and Labor MP Peter Khalil all updated their registers immediately after their failure to declare was noted by a transparency campaigner who tracks MPs' private interests.

Sean Johnson, a former Liberal staffer who now runs the Open Politics website, wrote to the three MPs this week after noticing they had not declared trips overseas

last year.

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Senator O'Neill did not declare she had travelled to Washington DC in September to attend a forum hosted by the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China. The forum was the subject of media - reporting. IPAC, established as a dialogue forum for international members of parliament concerned about rising Chinese aggression, posted photographs of Senator O'Neill and other attendees on its social media platforms. She is understood to have paid for the flights herself, and was reimbursed by IPAC some months later.



Her office said the Senate had a "clear and robust process to declare senators' interests".

"Due to an administrative error, the reimbursement was not declared within the allocated timeframe. This has now been rectified," a spokeswoman said.

Senator Van did not declare he had travelled to the COP 27 climate conference in Egypt in September, courtesy of the group Coalition for Climate. He spoke in the Senate about the trip, and on social media, acknowledging he had travelled courtesy of the Coalition for Climate.

His office said an update to his register of interests had been completed in November, but "it seems the update wasn't finalised due to administrative error". The error was rectified as soon as Mr Johnson contacted his office and the register will be updated by the Senate on Wednesday morning.

Mr Khalil, chairman of the parliamentary joint committee on intelligence and security, did not declare his attendance at the IPAC forum in Washington with Senator O'Neill and other colleagues. He updated his register immediately after Mr Johnson brought it to his attention.

His office said an "error in office processes" was to blame for the failure to declare. Mr Khalil had also paid for the trip himself and there was a months-long delay in the reimbursement from IPAC, which led to the "delay in registering this trip".

Members of the House of Representatives have 28 days to declare sponsored travel and other hospitality and gifts. Senators have 28 days at the start of parliament, and 35 days for any subsequent updates or changes.

Those who fail to declare trips can be held in contempt if they are found to have knowingly concealed the hospitality or sponsored travel, but this rarely, if ever, occurs, with most failures to declare deemed oversights.

"Unfortunately, this happens all too often as the parliamentary committees that are supposed to enforce compliance with the interests register rarely investigate potential breaches," Mr Johnson said.

ELLEN WHINNETT, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

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