

Is Taiwan buying political influence in Australia?

Former Prime Minister Scott Morrison holds the distinction of being the first former PM to be formally censured by the Australian parliament, for secretly appointing himself to five ministerial positions, which was a national scandal. After losing the election, Morrison is now attempting to be a fixture of the international speaking circuit, and has recently signed up to a talent agency which charges up to \$100,000 for speaking engagements with world leaders. Australian politicians are not required to disclose details such as the value of any “registrable interests” (such as gifts they have received) which may conflict, or be seen to conflict, with their public duty. Therefore, the monetary value of the numerous sponsored overseas trips Morrison has accepted is unknown. Morrison has declined to disclose whether he has been paid for various international speaking engagements, only declaring receiving “honorarium” from various organisations.



Former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison meeting with Taiwan's President Tsai in 2023.
Photo: Screenshot

However, comparable payments made to politicians in other jurisdictions hint at how much money Australia's former PM could be earning on the international speakers' circuit. In 2023, British parliamentarian Liz Truss, the shortest-serving prime minister in UK history (Truss was PM for 44 days), declared £248,194 in earnings from speaking engagements (around \$478,764) plus an additional £8,136 (\$15,694) in flights and accommodation for Truss and her staff or spouse to attend these events. Some of Truss's disclosures indicate the potential value of the trips Morrison has accepted, as the two ex-PMs have attended the same international conferences.

For example, Morrison accepted a business-class airfare, accommodation and incidentals from the International Democrat Union (IDU) to attend the IDU's December 2022 conference in Washington DC. Truss accepted flights and accommodation, to the value of around £12,210 (\$23,553), to attend the same event, which were donated by IDU's Honorary Chairman Lord Michael Ashcroft, a British billionaire who is a powerful figure in the UK's Conservative party, and who once donated \$1 million dollars to then-Australian Prime Minister John Howard for his 2004 re-election campaign.

Similarly, in February 2023 the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC) paid for Morrison to travel to Japan to speak at IPAC's symposium, providing businessclass flights, accommodation and incidentals. IPAC also paid for Truss to attend the same conference with a staff member, providing flights and accommodation valued at £8,600 (\$16,595). IPAC is a UK-based anti-China organisation, whose parliamentary members coordinate to agitate against the Chinese government. IPAC receives money from the US government through its funder, the quasigovernmental National Endowment for Democracy (NED). IPAC is also funded by NED-collaborator the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD), an organisation which was founded in 2003 by the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and receives funding from the Taiwanese government. TFD's Chair is Si-Kun You, President of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan (parliament), and TFD's Vice Chair is Jaushieh Joseph Wu, Taiwan's Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Morrison's latest attack on China was delivered in Taipei, at the 11 October 2023 Yushan Forum, an event which is co-organised by the Taiwanese government. During Morrison's Yushan Forum speech, he provocatively called for a revision of Australia's One China policy and advocated increased arms sales for Taiwan (AAS, 10 Oct. 2023). During his four-day trip to Taiwan, Morrison met with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, in what *The Australian* on 10 October described as a “highly symbolic meeting”. Morrison has declared accepting business-class fares to Taiwan, accommodation and “incidentals” to attend the Yushan Forum (Morrison's description on the Members' Register is vague and does not clearly confirm whether it was in fact the Yushan Forum which sponsored his trip). Liz Truss has disclosed that her May 2023 trip to Taipei to “support the free democracy of Taiwan” was funded by the Taiwanese government to a total value of £10,841 (\$20,916). While in Taipei, Truss was paid £80,000 (\$154,348) by the Prospect Foundation for a speech in which she called for the development of an “economic NATO”, aimed at confronting China. The Prospect Foundation, which is a coorganiser of the Yushan Forum, has deep ties to Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). In March 2022, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo travelled to Taipei to make a speech for the Prospect Foundation, in which he provocatively called for the USA to recognise Taiwan as a sovereign country. It was later revealed that the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in

the United States (TECRO) had clandestinely paid Pompeo US\$150,000 (around \$235,923) to make the trip to Taiwan.

Taiwan funds political junkets

In previous years, Taiwan has paid prominent overseas figures large sums to promote the Taiwanese government's message and build support for Taiwan. Taiwan engages in extensive lobbying activities in Washington and donates significant funds to American security think tanks, which churn out reams of pro-Taiwan and anti-China material.

Morrison is not the first former Australian Prime Minister to be invited to speak at the Yushan Forum. He was preceded by Malcolm Turnbull, who addressed the organisation in 2020, and Tony Abbot, who made a provocative speech to the 2021 Forum labelling China a "bully" and urging solidarity with Taiwan.

The Taiwanese government is a major sponsor of overseas travel for serving Australian parliamentarians. As reported in *The Australian* on 16 September 2019, in 2016-19 Taiwan funded travel for 23 members of parliament, as part of the Taiwanese government's "attempts to increase its influence in Canberra". *The Australian* noted that during the same period, politicians had scaled back trips to China, which coincided with the massive anti-China propaganda operation which escalated from 2017, and successfully implemented a shadow foreign policy agenda of hostility toward China. During 2016-19, Taiwan funded more Australian politicians' travel than the United States (which sponsored 22 trips), coming second only to Israel, which funded 44 trips during this period. In 2018 and 2019, now-Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Communications Minister Michelle Rowland and Skills and Training Minister Brendan O'Connor travelled to Taiwan, with expenses covered by the Taiwanese government.

As documented by Open Politics, an Australian political influence watchdog, between 2019 and April 2023, Taiwan overtook Israel to move into first place as the top sponsor of Australian parliamentarians' travel.¹ Although overall travel was impacted by COVID-19 travel restrictions, Taiwan funded a total of 18 trips during this period, ahead of the USA in second place, which funded 15.

Challenging China: Can a legislative alliance have leverage?

William Yang in Tokyo
02/20/2023



Scott Morrison is being paid to attend many of the same events as former UK Prime Minister Liz Truss, who under UK law has had to disclose being paid almost £250,000 in 2023. How much has Morrison been paid?

In September 2023, an additional eight Australian politicians travelled to Taiwan on the Taiwanese government's dime. This delegation was led by Labor MP Josh Wilson and Liberal MP Paul Fletcher, and included the Shadow Assistant Foreign Affairs Minister, Liberal Senator Claire Chandler. Other members of the delegation included Labor MPs Graham Perrett and David Smith, who had both previously accepted sponsored trips to Taiwan in 2019 and 2020, respectively, courtesy of the Taiwanese government. The Taiwanese government paid for the September 2023 delegation's flights, accommodation, hospitality and transport (with the exception of Wilson, who paid for his own flights), and gave gifts of ceremonial tea sets to Wilson and Fletcher. According to *The Australian* on 25 September 2023, a spokesperson from Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted that "This visit of cross-party heavyweight parliamentarians to Taiwan shows their support" for the island, although there are questions over the genuine extent of the parliamentary support claimed by Taiwan, given the fact that the Taiwanese government paid for the junket. Notably, three members of the delegation, Labor MPs Daniel Mulino and David Smith and Liberal Senator Claire Chandler, are also members of IPAC, which is financed by the Taiwanese government-funded Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD). IPAC has also paid for its other parliamentary members to travel overseas, including Labor MP Peter Khalil, Labor Senator Deb O'Neill, Liberal MP Andrew Hastie, and Liberal Senator James Paterson, who have all travelled to Washington DC, courtesy of IPAC.

Buying influence?

In 2019, Independent MP Andrew Wilkie advocated a ban on political junkets, asserting that their purpose was to serve as a vehicle for foreign entities to attempt to "alter Australian policy, attitudes

or perceptions". Wilkie stated that most politicians were "not immune to the influences being peddled during such trips so it is simply not good enough for anyone to think all is well so long as these journeys are recorded in senators' and members' registers of interest". Wilkie's views were reflected by Open Politics' Sean Johnson, who wrote in the organisation's 20 April 2023 analysis of sponsored overseas travel that the "purported aims of many of the trips are to foster cultural and economic exchanges and build relationships between countries. But only the most politically naïve or wilfully ignorant would dispute that the trips are funded in large part to try to influence MPs in some way, whether on a foreign policy issue or commercial matter". Johnson pointed to the example of the US State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program (ILVP), which has funded Australian politicians to travel to the USA for decades, covering flights, accommodation, hospitality and entertainment expenses. As Johnson documented, although the program is presented as a "benevolent professional exchange program to help upcoming foreign leaders to engage US officials", in reality the program "delivers tremendous value for US foreign policy ... and supports US foreign policy goals", as openly admitted by Michael Pignatello, a State Department foreign service officer and liaison to the US Defence Department.

Notably, there is a carve-out for politicians in Australia's Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITS) legislation, which requires anyone representing a foreign "principal" to register certain activities with the government, a law which was ushered in under the media-hyped threat of alleged Chinese government foreign interference. Members of parliament are exempt from having to register activities undertaken on behalf of a foreign principle.



Australian Labour MP Josh Wilson (speaking), and Liberal MP Paul Fletcher (seated left) in a delegation of Australian politicians to Taiwan in 2023. Photo: Screenshot

Some of Australia's most notorious China-agitators have accepted travel to Taiwan, courtesy of the Taiwanese Government. This includes the late Labor Senator Kimberley Kitching, who was a member of Albanese's 2018 political junket to Taipei, and Shadow Home Affairs Minister Senator James Paterson, who travelled to Taiwan in 2017 courtesy of the Taiwanese Government. As reported by Open Politics, between 2019 and 2023, Paterson was second only to Morrison in the number of sponsored overseas trips he accepted (a total of seven). Paterson's international travel has been funded by entities including the US State Department; IPAC; Pyne and Partners, the consultancy firm of former Defence Minister Christopher Pyne which promotes AUKUS; and the Google-linked Schmidt Futures. In prior years, Paterson has also accepted the gift of event tickets from weapons manufacturers BAE Systems and Raytheon.

It is undeniable that some Australian politicians who have travelled to Taiwan have returned to push policies which are favourable to the island. Liberal Senator Eric Abetz, former Chair of the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee, accepted a trip to Taiwan in August 2019, courtesy of the Taiwanese government. The ABC reported 29 October 2021 that Abetz provocatively declared Australia was "duty bound" to defend Taiwan in the event of a war with China, advocated an Australia-Taiwan free trade agreement, demanded an end to Australia's One China policy and called for Australia to establish full diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

In November 2019, Liberal MP Ted O'Brien embarked on a four day "study tour" of Taiwan, with flights, accommodation and hospitality paid for by the Taiwanese government. According to the 8 September 2020 *Australian Financial Review*, after his return O'Brien urged the Morrison Government to "pursue a free trade agreement with Taiwan, despite the likelihood it will anger China and trigger a further deterioration in relations". Following this, O'Brien continued to publicly agitate against China in relation to trade matters. In addition, as chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade's Trade Sub-committee, O'Brien led a parliamentary inquiry which investigated the expansion of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Many members of O'Brien's inquiry, including those who were most active in the hearings, had previously accepted trips to Taiwan which were funded by the Taiwanese government. In its February 2022 final report, O'Brien's inquiry recommended that Australia work with other CPTPP members to encourage and facilitate the accession of Taiwan to the CPTPP, an objective for which the Taiwanese government has intensely campaigned for some time. O'Brien's inquiry also suggested that the Albanese Government should consider negotiating a free trade agreement with Taiwan.

As reported by the 9 December 2022 *Guardian*, a bipartisan delegation of six Australian politicians

travelled to Taiwan in December 2022 on a junket funded by the Taiwanese government. The delegation included former Deputy Prime Minister, National Party MP Barnaby Joyce, who upon his return suggested that future Taiwan trips should include government officials or ministers. Joyce's reasoning was because "When you're more experienced you know how to not go off script, but if you have delegations without government officials, they could, dangerously so."

Footnotes

[1.](#) Sean Johnson, "Foreign government and private groups subsidise 132 overseas trips over four years", Open Politics (openpolitics.au), 20 Apr. 2023.

By Melissa Harrison, Australian Alert Service 25 October 2023