

Mathias Cormann's 2018 family holiday in Singapore is costing him a good deal more than the \$2780.82 he [belatedly paid](#) for airfares booked with Helloworld travel company's CEO who happened to be the Liberal party treasurer and a mate.

Cormann, Government Senate Leader, says he gave his credit card number to Andrew Burnes in July 2017 and assumed – until a media query this week - the transaction had gone through. He received no reminders about the outstanding payments.

He also says he had nothing to do with handling a contract his Finance department awarded a subsidiary of the company around the same time.

In his explanation for not noticing he hadn't been charged, Cormann told a Senate estimates hearing on Tuesday he travelled a lot and many travel-related expenses went through his card.

It's reasonable to take Cormann at his word about missing that the charge hadn't been processed. Even accepting this, however, the affair looks bad for Cormann, who failed the "Caesar's wife" test.

He should not have booked through the CEO, given the man is a political and personal associate, and the company has a commercial relationship with Cormann's department.

If he wanted to use that company, he should have gone to the normal booking service. It would have been more prudent to have used another travel agency.

Helloworld's chief financial officer Michael Burnett says, in a letter Cormann produced on Tuesday, that the flights were never intended to be free. But Burnett provided an odd explanation for no reminders. "Because we held your credit card details at the time of the booking, payment reminders were not sent to you, even though the amount remained listed as 'Outstanding' on our internal system".

You'd expect the company would have either processed the payment or sent a reminder.

Scott Morrison's aggressive reaction – accusing Labor of going “to the bottom of the chum bucket” - when the opposition asked if Cormann had any conflict of interest, given the contract, doesn't help the government. The public's default position is scepticism when it comes to politicians' conduct.

Giving Cormann the benefit of all doubt, the matter smacks of cosiness and cronyism – a politician using his connections to smooth his way (just as that famous picture of Joe Hockey and Cormann smoking cigars sent a signal of complacency and came to haunt both of them).

This is one more setback for Cormann, who has seen his reputation badly dented in the last few months.

His decision in August to throw his lot in with Peter Dutton and declare Malcolm Turnbull had lost the confidence of the Liberal party sealed the fate of the former prime minister, with all that followed, including the Coalition being plunged into minority government.

There were multiple players in Turnbull's downfall, not least Turnbull himself, but Cormann was a major one.

Cormann's judgement was also off beam in his belief that he could muster the necessary crossbench votes last year to pass the government's tax cuts for large companies.

His commitment was a factor in the government's clinging to this measure for too long, to the detriment of Turnbull.

Earlier this year it was revealed Cormann used a defence plane, at a cost of \$37,000, to fly from Canberra to Perth so he could drop into Adelaide to lobby (unsuccessfully) a couple of Centre Alliance senators to support the cuts.

His spokesperson said at the time: “Use of the special purpose aircraft was approved in the appropriate way to facilitate official business in Adelaide in transit from Canberra back to Perth in between two parliamentary sitting weeks”.

Cormann, obsessed with trying to rustle up votes, didn’t stop to consider how over-the-top this would look to most people, who would say “find a way to fly commercial” or “have a video call”. After Bronwyn Bishop’s helicopter flight, politicians should automatically hit a pause button before ordering up expensive transport.

It is obvious from Cormann’s demeanour that he is very aware he’s politically diminished. His reputation was as one of the government’s best performers, but he is not out in the media as much these days.

Another cabinet minister, Michaelia Cash, embroiled in the court case about her office leaking an imminent police raid on the AWU, has almost disappeared from public view.

This week’s Senate estimates hearings have been damning for the embattled Cash.

The Australian Federal Police gave evidence on Monday that Cash and former justice minister Michael Keenan had declined, despite at least two requests, to provide “witness statements” about media leaks. Rather, they responded by letter.

Morrison defended the two ministers’ behaviour. “I’m advised that both ministers did, in fact, cooperate with that investigation on a voluntary basis,” he told parliament on Tuesday. “I’m advised that neither minister received any further requests for information after they responded to the AFP’s initial invitation to provide information”.

On Tuesday night, Cash was put through the wringer during a Senate estimates hearing. Amazingly, the minister said she had not read the AFP’s Monday evidence. Asked why, she said, “because I haven’t”.

View from The Hill: Minister who watches the nation's credit card overlooks his own

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Taxpayers, incidentally, are currently up for \$288,812 for Cash's legal representation.

Although Cormann's tickets affair is very different from the issue involving Cash and Keenan, the message from the behaviour of all three is one of elitism – politicians thinking they don't have to do things the way ordinary people do.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Read more <http://theconversation.com/view-from-the-hill-minister-who-watches-the-nations-credit-card-overlooks-his-own-112081>