

A frequent flyer foreign minister? Thank heavens for that

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Reading *The Daily Telegraph's* snarky little article on Kevin Rudd's overseas travel this morning, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The Tele reports breathlessly that he has "notched up a staggering 384,000km in overseas air travel since becoming Foreign Minister – the equivalent of flying to the moon". Taxpayers have "forked out hundreds of thousands of dollars to fly Mr Rudd and his entourage on the equivalent of 10 around-the-world trips since September".

So this is what it's come to: we complain when the foreign minister visits foreign countries.

We should be complaining if the foreign minister did not visit foreign countries. I feel like I've entered Jerry Seinfeld's 'Bizarro World', where up is down and down is up.

Meeting with foreigners is a large part of the foreign minister's job. And it's not always possible for foreigners to get to Canberra for meetings.

This is a classic – no, an epic – example of small-country thinking. It reveals a depressingly shrunken opinion of Australia's possibilities. Do we really take such a straitened view of Australia's role in the world that we cavil at the cost of airline tickets for the person responsible for managing our international relations?

And does anyone really think this is pleasure travel for the minister and his staff? The media spends a good deal of time poking fun at Mr Rudd's frantic schedule. Try to imagine what these trips are like. I doubt there's much time spent at the hotel spa. I'd say it's one airport lounge and meeting room after another.

Too often, the press gallery engages in this kind of pettifoggery – obsessively monitoring politicians' salaries and counting up their mobile phones and entitlements and trips. The truth is, this stuff is trivial next to the important issues being debated in Parliament House. Over-emphasising it cheapens our national discourse and lowers the value we place on public service.

Other countries of Australia's size and reach do not distract themselves with this nonsense. Australia is the only serious country that would have a debate about whether the advantages of membership to the UN Security Council – the world's premier crisis-management forum and the pointy end of the international system, no less – is worth the price of campaigning for it.

Do you think the American media queries the travel undertaken by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton? Quite the reverse: the fact that she has travelled more than half a million miles for her job is seen as a positive! It's quoted approvingly in profiles in *Vanity Fair*. It demonstrates that she is out there prosecuting her country's interests and advocating its values.

So much so, indeed, that Clinton has her own travel page on the State Department's website, which includes a mileage meter and indications of days travelled and countries visited. She doesn't do this to satisfy her critics, or head off FOI requests. It's an indicator of energy and ambition. In fact, in his address on the Middle East last week, her boss President Obama actually overstated Clinton's travel for effect, saying that she was approaching the one million frequent flyer mile mark.

I was sorry to see the Liberal foreign affairs spokesperson, Julie Bishop, and former foreign minister Alexander Downer pipe up on this issue. It sets an awful, self-defeating precedent for Ms Bishop

should she ever become foreign minister. As for Mr Downer, I'll simply say that I preferred the argument he made in his 2007 Playford Lecture, when he accused his opponents of running a 'Little Australia' campaign and ignoring Australia's 'responsibilities as a significant global citizen'. He urged them to 'think big'.

That's excellent advice for all concerned. Think big.

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