

Opinion

If we want women in parliament it needs to be more family-friendly |

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Political journalists and every opposition staffer are currently scouring the records of the independent parliamentary expenses authority looking for a fresh angle to try to claim the scalp of the communications minister, Anika Wells. Everyone loves a user-friendly scandal. But is the current round of frenzy surrounding Anika Wells warranted?

The most outrageous example of taxpayer waste unearthed last week is the staggering \$100,000 spent on a trip to New York for Wells to assist the government's social media ban for children under 16. The cost absolutely deserves scrutiny. The exorbitant fares came after a last-minute change of flights after Wells had to stay in Australia to manage a dossier failure. Most likely these would have been organised at arm's length to allow her to maintain her ministerial commitments, and they were also signed off by the prime minister, Anthony Albanese.

Maybe she should have cancelled the trip entirely. I'm pretty confident she wishes she did – not only to avoid the ensuing cost scandal, but also maybe to have spent a bit of couch time with her family after a torrid week of politics.

Which brings us to the flurry of stories about Wells' expenses while sports minister, including the use of the family reunion travel entitlement to bring her husband to various sporting events that she was attending in an official capacity. Wells is the minister for sport. She is expected to attend sporting events, whether she likes it or not. She has a family with three young children. Parliament allows the use of entitlements for family reunion purposes. She used the entitlement exactly as intended.

Does anyone really think taking three small children, including four-year-old twins, to the snow for 48 hours while also trying to work in an official capacity was a luxury? While it may not pass the "pub test", the reunion was within the rules, which are there to try to make a demanding job easier for family life.

Should taxpayers be paying for her spouse to attend a sporting event? The merits of this are debatable, but the current system allows it in a limited capacity, recognising that MPs are often required to attend events away from family and from Canberra. The official justification of the allowance is to facilitate "the family life of the parliamentarian". Yes, they are supported by the taxpayer to have one.

Federal parliament is a different place to what it used to be, but it remains a patriarchal institution, designed for days when absent fathers were the norm. A ministerial schedule is relentless, and it is often the family "conscripts" who pay the highest price. Thankfully, the face and attitudes of the parliament are changing. Largely as a result of Labor's affirmative action rules, the number of young women, including those with children, is growing.

This is a good thing. If we want our parliament to reflect our society, we need working women with young children to be there, fighting for policy changes that help others like them. (499 words)