I refer to the reforms to the Parliamentary entitlements. Please note the following concerns:

**ELECTORATE CHARTER**

When the Government moved to a one vote – one value system of Government, the large rural electorates emerged with vast distances between major centres and commercial airports and the promise of sufficient charter to enable reasonable serviceability of these large, diverse electorates.

As the member of a large electorate, easily spending 60 to 70 hours per week travelling utilising all forms of transportation, air charter is a very necessary transportation method. Small aircraft are very uncomfortable for travel and are not as safe as a car or commercial aircraft. The substantial increase in costs associated with CASA regulations, landing fees and the cost of fuel adds additional strain to the Electorate Charter Budget.

An additional expense is incurred with the lease of the 4WD vehicle for use in the electorate. While this is an essential expense in such a large electorate, the rising cost of the lease of a 4WD vehicle also has a detrimental effect on the Electorate Charter Budget.

The current charter allowance is about half of that which I could easily use if it were available. Areas in this large rural and remote electorate need to be visited on a regular basis but have no regular commercial services.

The Kennedy Electorate seems to incur natural disasters each year necessitating the use of fixed wing or helicopter charter. In early 2009, over one quarter of the Kennedy Electorate was covered by flood water. This extensive flooding from Ingham on the east coast through to Karumba in the Gulf required flood inspections and meetings with local officials to ensure the needs of these isolated communities were being met. Unfortunately the inaccessibility of these areas was limited to fixed wing aircraft and helicopter access only. Over half of my annual charter budget was used in this two month period in January and February 2009 severely limiting visits to other areas of the Electorate due to a lack of charter funds.

This also occurred three years ago when Cyclone Larry devastated Innisfail, the centre of the Kennedy electorate.
Previously entitlements have allowed the aggregation of the Electorate Charter Budget and the Communications Allowance. With the new entitlements, aggregation is no longer allowable and this, therefore, will be a substantial reduction in the electorate charter.

As a Member of Parliament with a large rural based electorate, the capacity to travel by commercial flights is largely hindered by the lack of available flights and in some cases the inability to obtain a seat on those flights.

The use of Electorate Charter to travel between my home (Charters Towers) and my closest airport (Townsville) or my closest office (Innisfail) is not an effective use of Electorate Charter. However, this is necessary as travel by road and commercial aircraft adds additional hours to already long and necessary travel.

This means that it takes longer to fly commercially (including waiting times) than it does to drive when travelling from my home to my main Electorate office in Innisfail. This is a ludicrous waste of valuable time and money as the cost of a comcar (taxi) to travel from home in Charters Towers to Townsville airport is approximately $480. The same distance by charter aircraft costs between $700 and $1000. If the cost of the comcar can be allocated against the cost of the charter flight - as in charter aircraft in lieu of comcar - this would alleviate some pressure on the charter budget as well as relieve some time constraints.

These distances and associated choices in travel are shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From home in Charters Towers to:</th>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>Flying Time Charter Aircraft</th>
<th>Flying Time Commercial Aircraft</th>
<th>Driving Time</th>
<th>Driving Time plus Commercial Aircraft</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Townsville</td>
<td>140 km</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innisfail</td>
<td>391 km</td>
<td>65 minutes</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>5 hours</td>
<td>6 hours (including wait time, luggage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Isa</td>
<td>770 km</td>
<td>2 ½ hours</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>9 ½ hours</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| From Innisfail to:               |          |                            |                                 |              |                                      |
| Mount Isa                        | 1165 km  | 2 ½ hours                  | Not available                   | 15 hours     | 5 ½ hours (including wait time, luggage) |

| From Townsville to:              |          |                            |                                 |              |                                      |
| Mount Isa                        |          | 2 hours                    |                                 |              |                                      |
| Cairns                           |          | 1 hour                     |                                 |              |                                      |

| From Mount Isa to:               |          |                            |                                 |              |                                      |
| Cairns                           |          | 3 hours plus – no direct flight – goes via Townsville |                                 |              |                                      |

RECOMMENDATION 1 – That the $388 for taxi fare - Townsville Airport to Charters Towers and Charters Towers to Townsville Airport - be available for use in paying for a taxi or paying for a charter plane. Obviously a charter from Townsville Airport to Charters Towers can cost over $700 and would give a minimum short fall of $300 which would be met out of my charter budget. This, however, would save on average over 6 hours travel per week.
Aggregation

The aggregation of the new Communications Allowance (Communications and Printing) currently disallows from 1 July 2010 the inclusion of the Charter budget. Communications with the Electorate is a necessary part of a Member of Parliament’s role and utilising charter aircraft to travel within the Electorate is essential. The increase in the charter costs largely due to the global financial crisis has meant less charter for the budget but no less outlay by the Government. Whether it is printed communication or personal one on one contact with the elector is no difference to the government but one hell of a difference to the electorate.

It is my understanding that the aggregation of the Communications Allowance and Charter Entitlement was originally aggregated to offset the travel commitments in large electorates and the unavailability of commercial flights in remote and rural areas. With the introduction of the Printing Budget included in the new Communications Allowance this allows greater benefits in communicating with the Electorate. I believe the continued aggregation with the Electorate Charter Budget can immeasurably improve the service to the more remote areas of the large electorates and give an even greater understanding of the needs of these forgotten areas.

Aggregation of these three key areas of communication would certainly improve my availability and representation within this vast electorate and ensure that representation to all the regional communities is able to be more equitably maintained than has been able to in the past.

RECOMMENDATION 2 – That aggregation of the new Communications Allowance and Electorate Charter be allowed for Electorates larger than 500,000 km². This would enable greater communication with these large electorates that have different problems than their city based counterparts.

Increase to Electorate Charter Budget

Because of the vastness of our outback areas and the sparsity of population in these areas, the Australian Electoral Commission in its recent redistributions has created six large electorates in Australia over 500,000 km². These six members represent over 76% of Australia’s land mass but only 2.6% of the population. The members representing these six large electorates require a more substantial charter allocation to fulfil their responsibilities to their constituents.

The Parliamentary Education Office recently visited the Kennedy Electorate with their Parliament Alive program for Schools. While arranging for four areas of the Kennedy Electorate to visit, they stipulated that they would not go to Normanton because of accessibility and cost. This is just one remote area within the large Kennedy Electorate. The cost of a trip to Normanton from Mount Isa by charter aircraft is $3025.00. This is just one of the many remote communities in the Kennedy Electorate.

Recently re-fuelling has been removed from Karumba now necessitating additional travel and expense to Normanton to re-fuel.
Representing a remote and rural area with the diversity of Kennedy is a challenge that takes a little more forward planning, a little more itinerary work and usually a large chunk of Charter Allowance than visiting the outer areas of an inner metropolitan electorate. In many cases driving to these areas, while not inaccessible all year round, is a time consuming exercise when a charter flight can have you in and out in less than the time it takes to drive. Road conditions in these remote areas are also extremely challenging and can be impassable in the wet season. The current economic climate has participated in the demise of smaller airlines which had previously provided a commercial service to the remote communities and I am forced to rely more heavily on charter flights to meet commitments in these areas.

In October 2003 an average charter flight from Charters Towers to Townsville cost $495.00. In August 2009, the same flight with the same company cost $1155.00. In less than six years the cost of the same flight has more than doubled. These figures have been taken from invoices presented for payment.

RECOMMENDATION 3 – That an increase be made to Electorate Charter for Members representing the large Electorates of at least 25%. This recommendation is based on the continual increase in fuel, landing and maintenance costs of aircraft and the lack of commercial flights to the remote areas of the Electorate. It also takes into consideration the increase in costs of the leased Electorate Vehicle which is paid from the Electorate Charter Budget.

To give a budget of $100,000 for an electorate with 142 towns scattered throughout an area bigger than France does not go near being enough to properly service the people of Northern Australia with the same standard of representation as smaller urban electorates.

The Remuneration Tribunal has a responsibility to ensure that Members of Parliament representing these large electorates in Australia have reasonable access to sufficient funds to ensure proper representation.

Hon Bob Katter MP
Member for Kennedy

19 NOV 2008