

# Cabinet documents went missing at Doha airport ahead of Labor's Qatar decision

A locked bag containing cabinet documents was lost at Doha Airport one week before the Albanese government controversially blocked Qatar Airways from launching additional flights to Australia.



ANTHONY GALLOWAY

1:50pm today



*The cabinet documents were left on a plane at Doha airport. Shutterstock/Skorzeiwak.*

A staffer for Labor minister **Murray Watt** left a locked bag containing cabinet documents on a plane at Doha Airport last year, just one week before the **Albanese** government controversially decided to block **Qatar Airways** from launching additional flights to Australia.

The incident, which took place in July 2023, set off a diplomatic scramble to retrieve the confidential documents, which were nowhere to be found within minutes of being identified as lost.

*Capital Brief* can reveal that Watt, who was agriculture minister at the time, was flying with his team back from an official trip to Italy and India when the 'cabinet bag' was left on a plane at Hamad International Airport in Doha. After attempting to retrieve the bag shortly afterwards, they were told it could not be found.

Watt's office then alerted Australia's embassy in Doha, which was also unable to retrieve the bag, according to multiple sources who were granted anonymity to discuss the incident.

The bag was left on a plane belonging to an Indian airline – not Qatar Airways – and there is no evidence that it was taken by Qatari officials. It contained documents relating to domestic agricultural issues and there is no suggestion that there were any documents relating to the Qatar Airways decision or any other international issues.

Watt and his advisors had just travelled to Rome for the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations Conference and to Delhi and Mumbai where the minister led an Australian delegation to help push greater agricultural ties with India.

Watt's office, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Hamad International Airport and the Qatari embassy in Australia were all contacted for comment.

The timing of the incident raised suspicions among senior officials in DFAT. Transport Minister **Catherine King** was at the time considering an application by Qatar Airways to run 28 additional weekly flights to Australia. King officially made the controversial decision to block the application about a week later on 10 July, 2023, which sparked widespread criticism that it was made at the behest of **Qantas**.

*A staff member for Murray Watt left the documents on the plane. AAP/Mick Tsikas.*

Qatar Airways was back in the headlines this week after announcing its intention to buy a 25% stake in **Virgin Australia**, which is subject to approval by the Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC). The deal will allow the airline to bypass the need for approval for the extra flights by giving Virgin the ability to launch its own long-haul routes using Qatar planes.

Treasurer **Jim Chalmers** said this week the deal will only be approved if it is in Australia's national interest.

Australia registered multiple complaints with the Qatari government after Australian women were subjected to what they said were invasive body searches at Doha airport in October 2020 after a newborn baby was found abandoned.

Qatar Airways successfully dodged an Australian lawsuit over the incident in the Australian Federal Court earlier this year.

Sources have previously told this masthead that Foreign Minister **Penny Wong** was against granting the airline additional flights because of the treatment of the women in 2020.

Documents released under Freedom of Information laws revealed that the transport department sought advice from DFAT about the wording of a letter it was to send to the Qatari government formally rejecting the request for the extra flights to Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth.

King last year confirmed that the 2020 incident was “a factor” in the decision to block the extra flights but it “certainly wasn’t the only factor”.

“I haven’t pointed to that as one factor. What I have said is that it provides a context for the decision that I made,” she said in September last year.


Initially, King and other government ministers refused to provide reasons for the decision, saying an expansion of Qatar Airways flights would be against the “national interest”.



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