

Who funds Federal Parliamentarians' overseas travel?

An analysis of non-Australian government funded parliamentary travel between 2010 and 2018

During the nearly eight-year period covered by this report, Israel, China and the USA were the top three destinations for parliamentarians sponsored by non-Australian Government entities. The top non-Australian Government sponsor for parliamentarians travelling to Israel was the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC) (a public affairs organisation¹) and to the USA it was the Australia America Leadership Dialogue (AALD) (a diplomatic initiative²). The top non-Australian Government sponsor to China was Huawei, a private multinational telecommunications corporation.

According to the disclosures made in the federal parliamentary Registers of Interests for both the lower and upper houses, federal parliamentarians received 102 sponsored trips to Israel, 63 to China, and 49 to the USA where the costs were paid for by non-Australian Government sponsors.

The report counted two 'types' of trips – flights and accommodation; and accommodation only. The vast majority of all trips were flights and accommodation.

The largest sponsor of all non-Australian Government funded trips for federal parliamentarians was AIJAC. AIJAC was also the largest sponsor of trips to Israel and the Palestinian territories. Liberal politicians received the most trips from AIJAC (Liberal – 26, Labor – 17)). However, non-Australian government trips to Israel and the Palestinian Territories were nearly evenly split between Labor and Liberal (Labor – 48, Liberal – 51).

The largest sponsor of trips to China was Huawei (12). The Registers appear to show that of the 12 flights and accommodation trips, 7 were funded by solely by Huawei, 3 were funded by Huawei and Asialink,³ and 2 were funded by Huawei and the Australia China Business Council. Liberal parliamentarians received 7 of the 12 trips, and Labor parliamentarians 5. However, Labor parliamentarians received the most non-Australian Government sponsored trips to China (Labor – 37, Liberal – 25).

The largest sponsor of trips to the USA was AALD. Labor parliamentarians received the most non-Australian Government funded trips both from AALD (Labor 11, Liberal 5), and to the USA (Labor – 31, Liberal 15).

In total, businesses paid for 50 trips with flights and accommodation included, and a further 5 which involved only corporate-sponsored accommodation. Huawei was the single biggest corporate

¹ According to the AIJAC website, at <https://aijac.org.au/about-aijac/>

² According to the AALD website, at <http://www.aald.org/australian-american-leadership-dialogue>

³ When contacted, Asialink stated that it paid for its staff member only, and has no further information regarding the logistics of this trip.

sponsor of all non-Australian Government funded trips of parliamentarians worldwide, with the aforementioned 12 trips.

For the purposes of this report, ‘corporate’ was defined to mean companies run for-profit, excluding NGOs, think-tanks, universities, political parties, foundations, societies, and dialogues/forums.⁴

China was the most popular destination for corporate-funded trips overseas.

Section 1. Methodology

This research used the Federal Register of Members’ and Senators’ Interests to tabulate the number of non-Australian Government funded overseas trips from 19 July 2010 (the disclosure date for returning members to the 43rd Parliament⁵) until 28 May 2018. The Federal Registers of Interests are updated weekly, but members do not update at that frequency.

Members and Senators use this Register to disclose certain interests relating to financial, organizational and foreign links outside members’ roles as parliamentarians. Per the House and Senate’s standing orders regarding the Register, these interests include property, shareholdings, membership in organisations/associations/societies, gifts, travel and hospitality.⁶ Parliamentarians obligations to disclose extend to dependents and spouses.

For this report, the relevant item was ‘item 12’ (travel and hospitality).

The research used two measures of ‘non-Australian Government funded trips’:

- Type 1: flights and accommodation paid for by a non-Australian Government entity/ies;
- Type 2: flights paid for personally, but accommodation paid for by a non-Australian Government entity/ies.

Except where stated, Type 1 and Type 2 trips were aggregated for a ‘total’ that formed the basis of most of the report’s findings. These were aggregated for two reasons. First, the report aims to show where federal parliamentarians are receiving trips to travel to, and these two measures provide the fullest indication of this. Second, there is insufficient data to measure the monetary value of trips, and such data would be skewed by other variables (e.g. currency value, distance from Australia).

⁴ Not-for-profits run under the umbrella of a company (e.g. Alfred Herrhausen Society, Harold Mitchell Foundation) were treated as independent from the parent company. By way of contrast, scholarships given by a company (e.g. National Australia Bank Yachad Scholarship to Israel) fall under the definition of corporate sponsorship.

If it was unclear whether a sponsor was corporate or not (which happened in one instance, when ‘The CEO Retreat’ sponsored a trip), then it was treated as not.

⁵ Although new Senators only take their seats in the following financial year, returning members who sat between July 19 2010 and July 1st 2011 (and beyond) were nonetheless counted in the data to ensure the most consistent data representation of trips over time.

⁶ The House resolution can be found at https://www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members/Members/Register; and the Senate resolution at https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Chamber_documents/Senate_chamber_documents/standingorders/e00

Exclusions and limitations

'Non-Australian Government' was defined to exclude trips directly funded by the Department of Finance,⁷ or more recently the Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority.⁸ There is no obligation to report these in the Register of Members' Interests. Also excluded were trips funded by the Australian Defence Force Parliamentarian Program (ADFPP).⁹

Flight or room upgrades were excluded. While upgrade information can be interesting, it is not meaningful as a measure of overseas sponsorship since the upgrades are incidental to other trips.¹⁰

Charter flights, and only flights or land transport without accommodation was excluded. This was done to avoid counting stopovers as their own trip. It was also to avoid double-counting trips where parliamentarians were sponsored by multiple non-Australian Government funders, and circumstances where a member was on an Australian Government funded trip and took a company charter plane to view a large site (e.g. Solar Reserve charter flights to view solar panel covered land in the USA).¹¹

A limitation of this method was that there were some instances where a sponsor flew a parliamentarian to two countries, but only in one was accommodation offered. For example, there was a trip sponsored by the Business Council of British Columbia where the parliamentarian spoke at a university in China, then went to Canada. As no accommodation in China was specified, this trip only counted as a single trip to Canada and not to China. Because of irregularities like this, the results of this report may be somewhat conservative.

Another limitation in the data counting was the form of the Register. In many instances parliamentarians failed to specify an item number, or mistakenly described sponsored travel as an item 11 'gift' (instead of item 12, travel and hospitality). In addition, many disclosures had insufficient or ambiguous information, poor handwriting, and repetition of trips outside the intended period of disclosure.

To reduce the risk that parliamentarians who correctly reported interests could be over-reported against those that did not, the researcher counted every instance of a non-Australian Government sponsored trip that could be discerned from the information (excluding repeats of the exact same trip across disclosures), and cross-checked ambiguous trips using open source reporting and other members' disclosures.¹²

⁷ As reported at <https://www.finance.gov.au/publications/parliamentarians-reporting>

⁸ <https://www.ipea.gov.au/pwe>

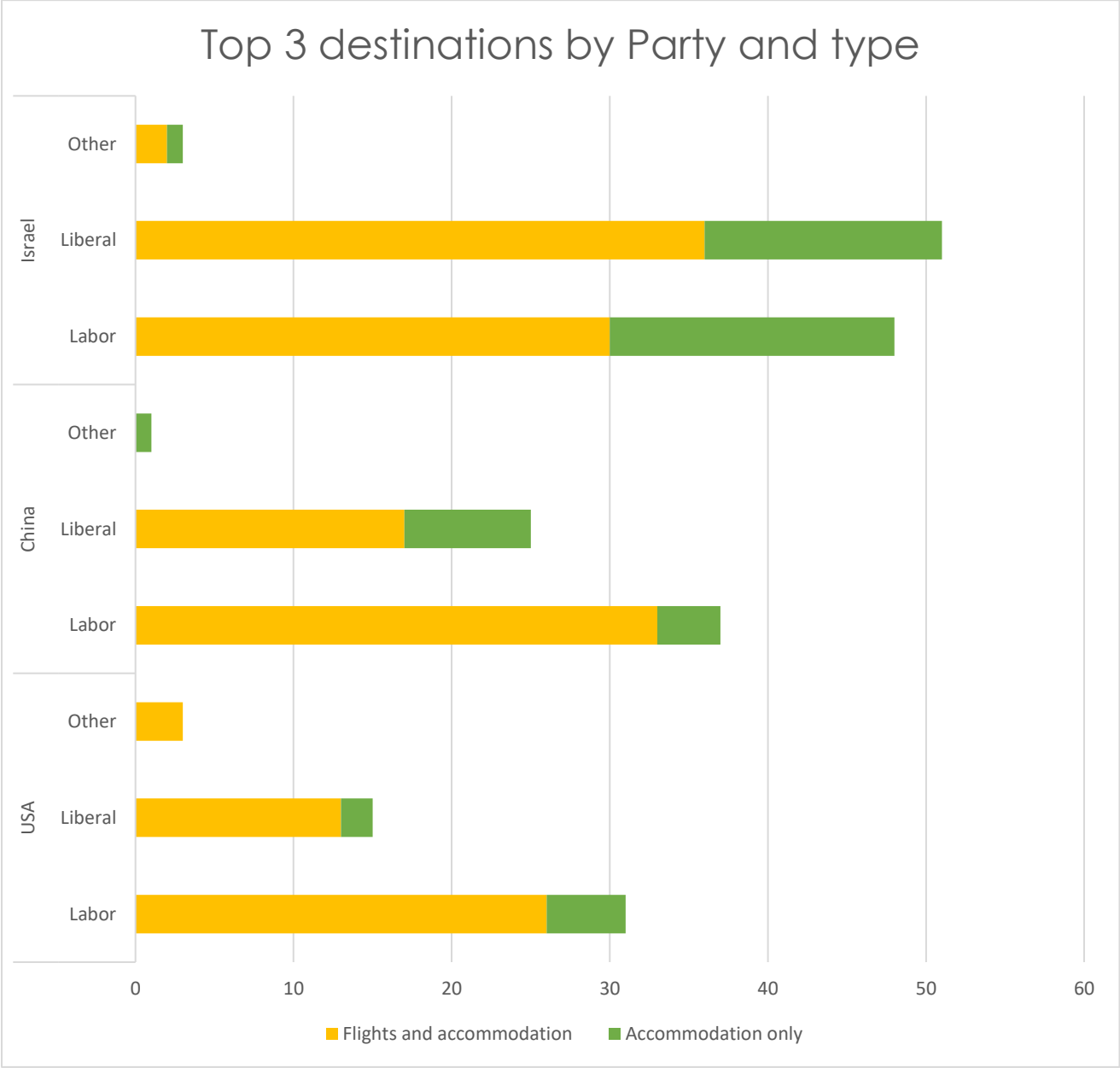
⁹ These were excluded because of ambiguity about whether there is an obligation for disclosure in the Registers, as some parliamentarians disclosed, while others did not. Parliamentarians' choice to disclose seemed more in the interest of transparency than obligation, as often the only information about the trip given was a general region (i.e. ADFPP trips to 'the Middle East.')

¹⁰ There were two trips sponsored by QANTAS, but these were Type 1 and so were included in the results.

¹¹ There were several charter flights provide by Oil Search, Solar Reserve, Executive Air Charter, and Toll Holdings Private Charter.

¹² For example, several parliamentarians went on a Save the Children sponsored trip to refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, but some only disclosed that they went to 'the Middle East.' The researcher cross-checked the trips by using the disclosures of the other parliamentarians on that trip, as well as media reporting at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-13/syria-refugee-crisis-six-politicians-one-bus-and-a-few-tears/8801612>.

Section 2. Top 3 destination countries

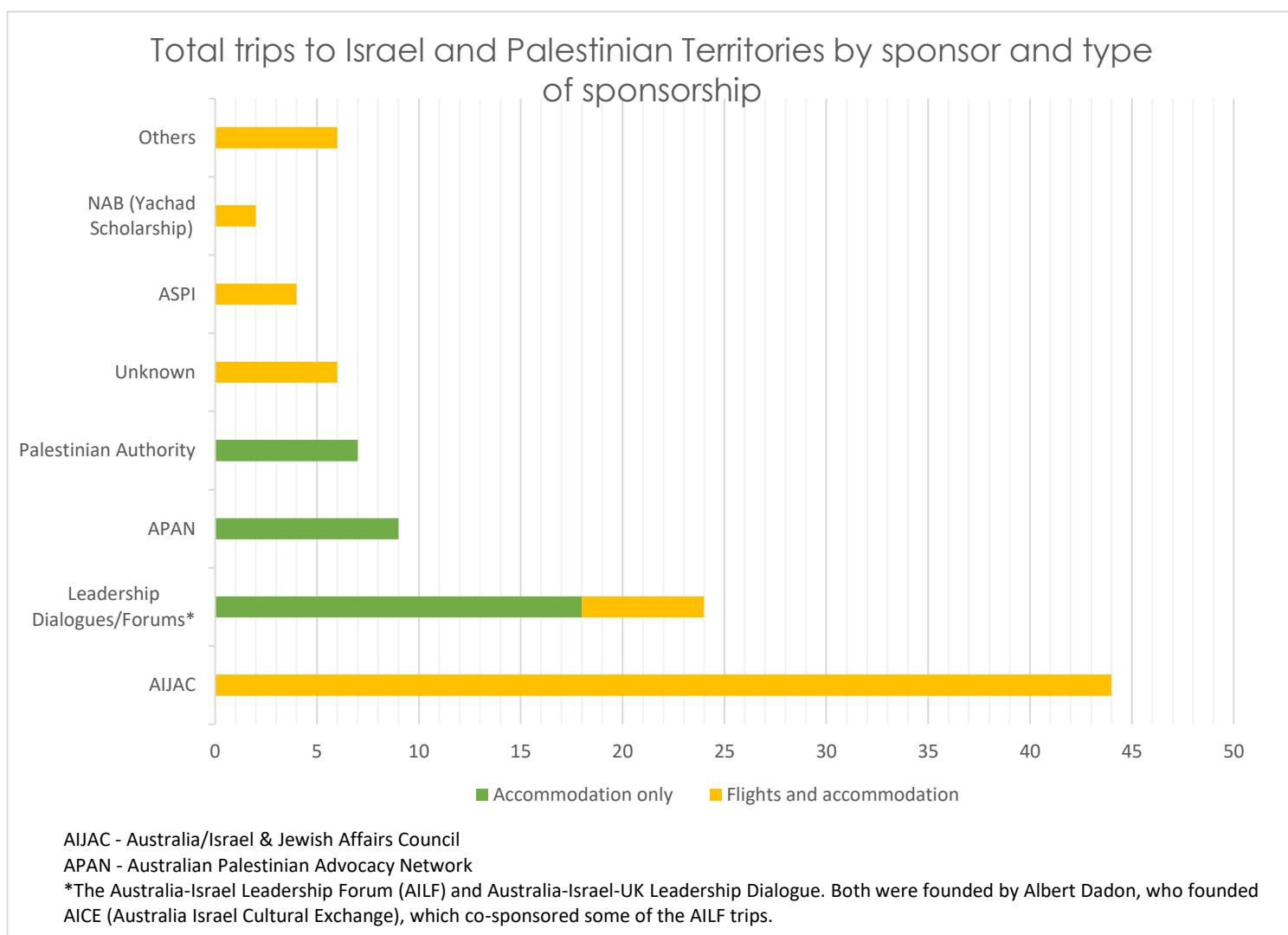


Section 3. Top 3 corporate-sponsored trips (global)

Rank	Company	Total	No. of trips by destination
1	Huawei Technologies ¹³	12	12 - China
2	Fortescue Metals Group	5	4 - China; 1 - PNG
3	Kazaru Pty Ltd ¹⁴	3	3 - China

Section 4. All sponsors for top 3 countries

a) Israel and Palestinian Territories

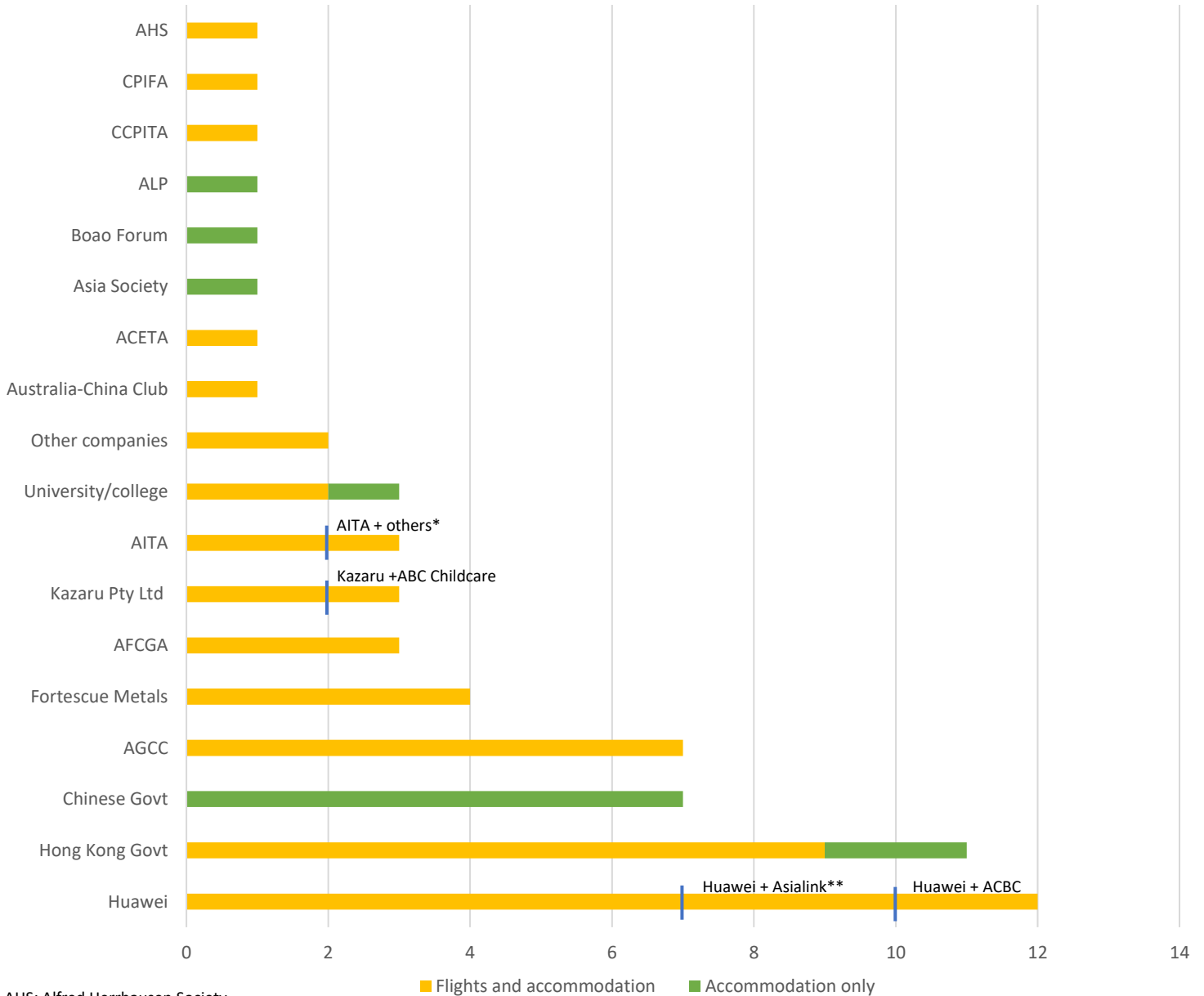


¹³ See footnote 3. Two were funded by Huawei and the Australia China Business Council.

¹⁴ One of the Kazaru Pty Ltd flights was co-sponsored with ABC Childcare, where flights were provided by Kazaru Pty Ltd and accommodation by ABC Childcare.

b) China

Sponsored trips to China by sponsor and type of sponsorship



AHS: Alfred Herrhausen Society

AITA: Australian International Trade Association

AFCGA: Australian Fellowship of China Guangdong Associations

AGCC: Australian Guangdong Chamber of Commerce

ACETA: Australia China Economic Trade and Cultural Association

AITA: Australian International Trade Association

CPIFA: Chinese People's Institute for Foreign Affairs

CCPITA: China Council for the Promotion of International Trade and Asia Inc

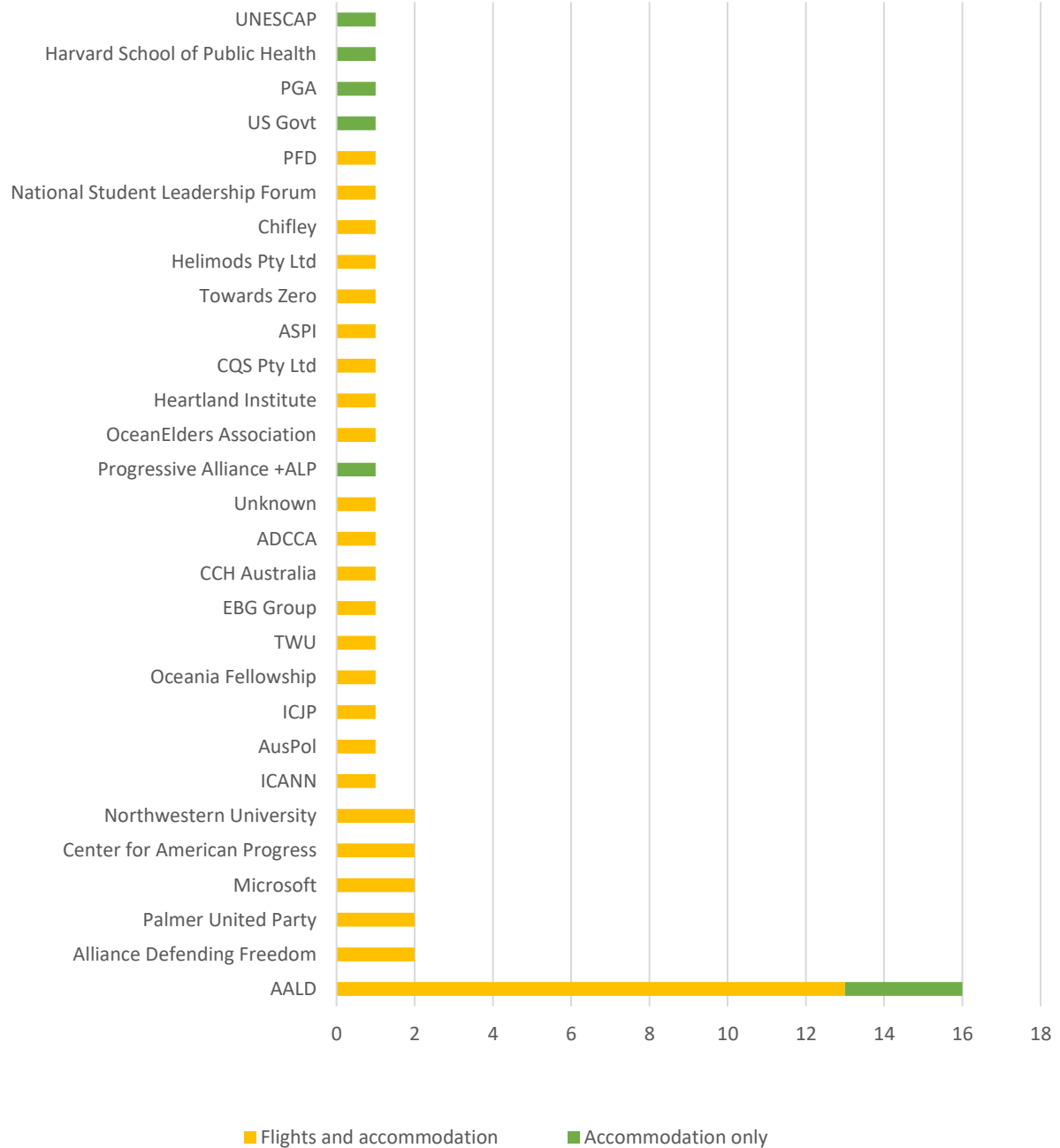
ALP: Australian Labor Party

*Others were: the New Zealand Internatioanl Exchange Center, The Australia China Sister City Summit, Australia China Business Summit and the Australian Federation Freetrade Organisation. AITA was picked out in the graph as it had sponsored other trips as well.

** See footnote 3.

c) USA

Sponsored trips to USA by sponsor and type of sponsorship



AALD: Australia America Leadership Dialogue

ALP: Australian Labor Party

ICANN: Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers

ADCCA: Australian Digital Currency Commerce Association

UNESCAP: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

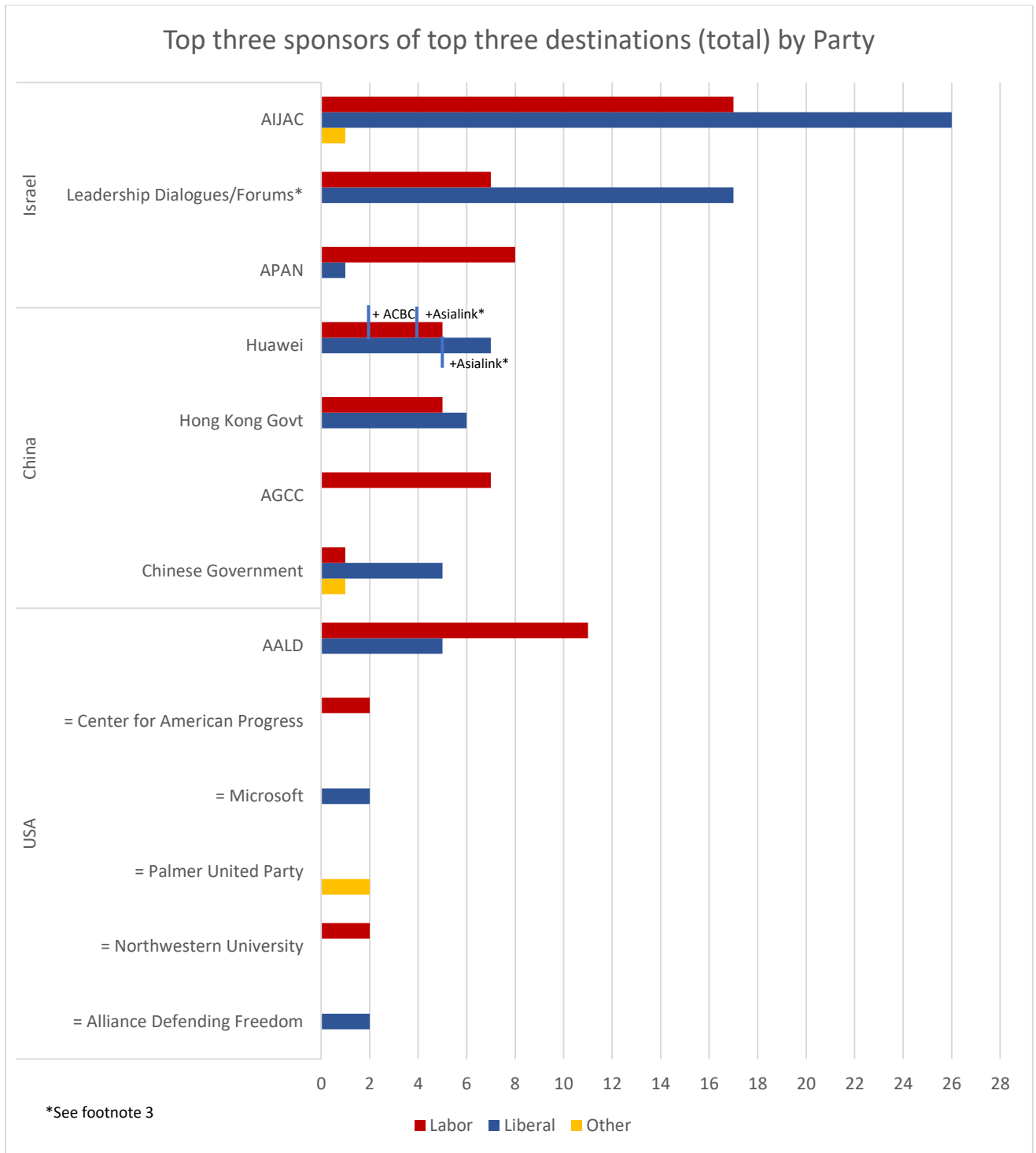
TWU: Transport Workers Union

ICJP: International Council of Jewish Parliamentarians

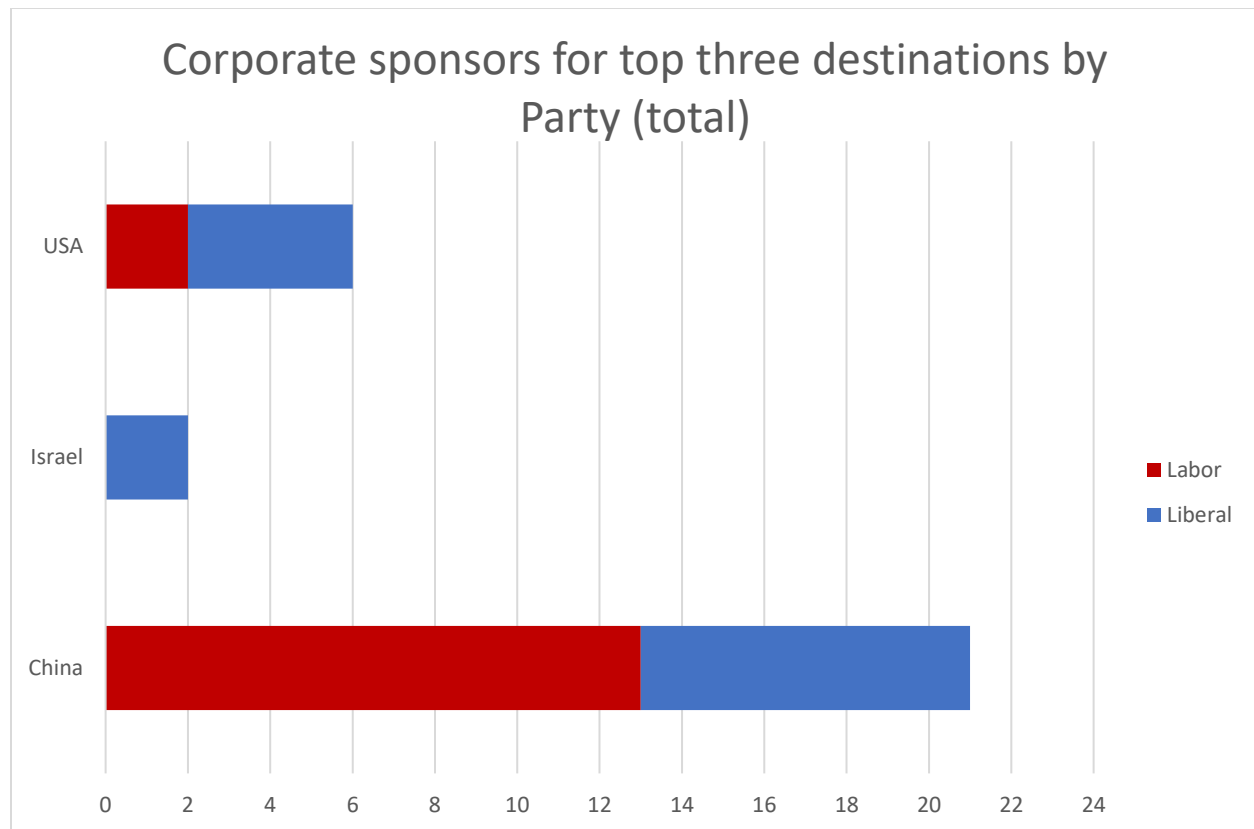
PGA: Professional Golfers Association of Australia

PFD: Parliamentary Foundation for Democracy

Section 5. Top 3 sponsors for top 3 countries by Party



Section 6. Corporate sponsors for top 3 destinations by Party



Section 7. Concluding remarks

Overall, Commonwealth parliamentarians are disclosing their interests in a way that furthers transparency and is healthy for Australian democracy. However, the format and system of disclosure is not particularly accessible. In addition to the problems mentioned in the methodology section, there was a lack of recent disclosures (some had not been updated since 2016). Locating the registers of Senators who resign mid-way through their term is difficult too as the registries are taken off the webpage.¹⁵ The disclosures were in pdf format but are unsearchable (by search function), considerably lengthening the process of locating specific information.

This research project attempted to gather data for some of the states, but except for Victoria,¹⁶ gathering current and historical state and territory wide data is impossible without physically accessing records located at state and territory parliaments. It is unacceptable that often the only way

¹⁵ To access the Register for Senators of the 43rd Parliament and senators whose disclosures were missing, the researcher used the Wayback Machine and National Archives to search archived pages.

¹⁶ The Register can be found here: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/publications/register-of-interests>

many Australians can access the pecuniary interests of their representatives is by making an appointment during the working week to physically visit the Registers.

The Registers of Members' and Senators' Interests should be improved across Australia to be more transparent and accessible online. 'Taxpayer-funded' spending of parliamentarians has already been reformed for the Federal Government via the Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority, and while not perfect, is a very good model that the Registers of Interests could adopt. In the meantime, states and territories that have not made their parliamentarians' disclosures available online should do so, including historical data. This would raise the baseline standard of disclosure and improve transparency that is essential for a healthy democracy.