

Chapter 5

Looking further afield

Australia and the European Union

5.1 The White Paper comments that Europe is undergoing momentous change and that the planned expansion of the European Union will increase its weight in international affairs. The EU's most notable achievement has been in economic integration and the Paper notes that, 'The European Union's economic weight has not yet translated into a comparable foreign and security policy weight'. The Paper also notes that bilateral relations with European states are 'the bedrock of Australia's European engagement'. (p. 99)

5.2 The White Paper's coverage of the European Union drew some criticism from the EU's representatives in Australia. The EU representative in Australia at the time of the Paper's release, the Ambassador of Greece, Fotios-Jean Xydas, speaking on behalf of the EU (by virtue of Greece's position as the then EU President) said that the White Paper, while positive on many points, missed completely the vital point that the EU is now politically integrated as well as a single trading bloc:

The Australian Government still seems to have difficulty with the concept of the EU as one trading bloc, and prefers to think of it as a compilation of 15 separate countries. In fact the EU is one trading area, without any internal borders, with one common policy on foreign trade, exactly the same as Australia has been since federation.¹

5.3 Another EU spokesperson expressed concern that the Paper appeared to have overlooked the EU's status (as a bloc) as Australia's largest trading partner. The Greek Ambassador also expressed concern at the comments in the White Paper which criticised the EU's regulatory controls as costly and cumbersome.²

5.4 The Australian Government did not accept the criticism. A spokesman for Mr Downer said: 'the Government recognised the reality that the EU was 15 separate nations: you can't expect the white paper to ignore that fact', he said. A spokesman for Mr Vaile said that in trade terms it was almost impossible to deal with the EU along group lines: 'It just doesn't work. In time we might get to the point where we deal with them as a bloc, but we're probably not quite there yet'.³

1 Marris, S, 'Australia has "missed the point" on European unity', *The Australian*, 20 February 2003.

2 Marris, S, 'Australia has "missed the point" on European unity', *The Australian*, 20 February 2003.

3 'Australia blind to new world order, EU warns', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 February 2003.

The Australian diaspora

5.5 While the White Paper makes occasional reference to the importance of people-to-people links, there is little to suggest that there is any real strategic value being placed by the government on the large number of Australians living and working abroad.

5.6 There is no question that the Australian consular service delivers quality assistance to the ‘more than one million Australians traveling, working and living overseas at any one time’ (p119). But the Committee believes that of these one million Australians, those especially who are abroad for several years at a time are an under-utilised resource when it comes to ‘projecting a confident Australia’.

5.7 The Committee notes that the White Paper refers to 720,000 Australians living overseas, ‘almost 4 per cent of our population’ (p 13). In a comprehensive submission received from the Southern Cross Group⁴, the Committee’s attention was drawn to apparent discrepancies in DFAT data concerning expatriates:

Figures provided to the SCG by DFAT in 2002 indicate that as at the end of 2001 there were estimated to be 858,866 Australians overseas. In the January 2003 version of its brochure *Hints for Travellers*, at page 28, DFAT states that “at any one time there are some 800,000 Australians living overseas”.⁵

5.8 The Committee believes that it is important that accurate figures are available, and that the Australian Census should provide for the inclusion of expatriate Australians in its statistics. Around 4 per cent of the population is no small number of people. To the extent that an important purpose of census data is to enable governments and private sector decision-makers to plan for the future, the inclusion of accurate data on expatriates is vital. The Committee notes that the United States has recently introduced the *Census of Americans Abroad Act 2003*, with a test census being conducted in three countries in preparation for the enumerating of Americans overseas in the 2010 census.

5.9 The Committee endorses the views of the Southern Cross Group that:

Those overseas should not be treated as “invisible” by the Australian Government. Australians overseas are highly visible “ambassadors” of their country, and play a key role in advancing Australian interests around the world.⁶

4 *Submission 11*, The Southern Cross Group is ‘an international non-profit organisation which seeks to represent the interests of Australian expatriates and support them. The Group engages in advocacy work in an effort to diminish some of the legal, administrative and technical barriers Australians face when they live and work outside their country of citizenship’.

5 *Submission 11*, p.5 (Southern Cross Group)

6 *Submission 11*, pp. 5–6 (Southern Cross Group)

Recommendation

5.10 The Committee recommends that the Australian Bureau of Statistics develop mechanisms for accurately enumerating the numbers of Australian citizens living overseas, with a view to facilitating their full participation in the Australian Census.

5.11 The Southern Cross Group raised in its submission several matters that the Committee wishes to bring to the attention of the government. These include:

- a) the seemingly high cost of basic notarial services, many of which only take a matter of seconds for consular staff to provide a stamp and a signature;
- b) the need for enhanced online services for passport applications;
- c) the tendency for DFAT services to be focused heavily on *travellers*, when those services are equally needed by resident expatriates;
- d) extremely low levels of outreach by missions to expatriate Australians. One Japanese expatriate notes: “My cat has a better status in Japan—at least the local vet contacts us on a regular basis”;
- e) more effort should be devoted by DFAT to negotiating reciprocal agreements on drivers’ licences;
- f) lack of clarity and detail in relevant brochures about medical insurance, and reciprocal agreements that may operate between countries; and
- g) ongoing confusion about the citizenship status of expatriates who acquire another citizenship by naturalisation, or of the spouses of expatriates who marry abroad.

5.12 The Committee reiterates the view that it expressed in its earlier Discussion Paper that the White Paper does not appear to recognise that, in a globalised economy, a diaspora which involves 40,000 Australians leaving each year to live, work or study abroad might require a rethinking of concepts of citizenship, voting rights, or even eligibility for awards such as ‘Australian of the Year’ (which has until recently been restricted to residents). The White Paper provides no vision as to how Australia might harness its expatriate capital to assist in ‘advancing’ the national interest or to ensure that our global citizens retain strong ties to Australia.

5.13 The Committee is pleased to note that, on 16 October 2003, the Senate referred the question of the needs of expatriate Australians to its Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee. The report of the Committee is due to be tabled on 1 September 2004.⁷

7 For details see http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/legcon_ctte/expats03/index.htm

