

## Submission to the Australian Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Thank you for extending the deadline to submit to this inquiry and for asking for more input from Australians abroad. I live abroad, intending to repatriate in early April, 2021.

At this time, September, 2020, I am concerned the government response to COVID-19 disadvantages and sometimes endangers Australians abroad. The 10 concerning issues I observe relate broadly to travel, immigration bureaucracy, the ability to vote, safety within the quarantine system, and communication.

### ISSUE 1: Insufficient passenger caps (gross weekly)

The federal government’s cap of 4,000 international passengers a week is the equivalent of 1.5 Boeing 747s per day for all of Australia. As repatriates are increasingly having flights cancelled or are being bumped off their ticketed flights, this is insufficient. The reason given for the cap when the federal government announced it in July was stress on state and territory quarantine services. In January and February the federal government provided quarantine services, but since then it has been managed by the states and territories.

Please see this related article by Elias Visontay, published August 28, 2020, in The Guardian, titled *Airlines warn flying back 100,000 stranded Australians will take six months unless travel caps eased.*

- Recommendation 1A:  
Resume federal quarantine services.
- Recommendation 1B:  
Abolish the weekly international arrival cap.

### ISSUE 2: Damaging per plane passenger caps (overt in NSW, by default elsewhere)

NSW currently allows 350 international arrivals per day, but only 30-50 passengers per plane. Other cities have weekly limits which divide by 7 to be equivalent to: Perth 75 passengers a day, Brisbane 71 passengers a day, and Adelaide 71 passengers a day, causing informal caps. Canberra and Darwin have no published limits, but neither are airlines advertising flights to those cities. Melbourne and Hobart accept no international arrivals.

Airlines are raising their prices and prioritising premium seats but they are not villains — they are trying to afford to keep bringing us home within the constraints of our governments' passenger limits. Repatriates are becoming homeless overseas as they are removed from flights or have their flights cancelled.

Please see this related article by Adam Thorn, published September 9, 2020, in Australian Aviation, titled *We'll stop flying if caps remain, warn international airlines.*

Recommendation 2:  
Request states abolish per plane caps.

ISSUE 3: Arrival capacity not being met

While they are doing their best to stay commercially viable and fly repatriates home, there is obvious chaos within the airlines undertaking this process. A strong example of this is that the insufficient cap of 4,000 international passengers into Australia each week is reportedly not even being met, despite flight cancellations and bumped passengers.

Please see this related article by Michael Koziol, published August 30, 2020, in the Sydney Sun-Herald, titled *Quarantine system for returned travellers running below capacity.*

Recommendation 3:  
Coordinate repatriation flights.

ISSUE 4: Risky passport procedures for offspring

Australians who have given birth overseas are unable to bring their children home unless they have a passport. In some cases, this is causing months long delays in repatriation and risky travel to consular offices during a pandemic.

Please see this related article by Yasmin Jeffery, published July 23, ABC News Online, titled *Stranded on their own - Netherlands stateless without a passport.*

Recommendation 4:  
Allow offspring born to Australians overseas to repatriate without passports.

ISSUE 5: Risky visa renewal procedures for residents

People in Australia with valid visas are being made to leave the country for bureaucratic re-application processes. This puts them at COVID-19 risk, financial distress, and at risk of being unable to return to Australia due to our government's flight caps. Sometimes people in this position are the primary caregiver for their children, exacerbating their problems.

Recommendation 5:

Allow visa holders to renew in Australia.

ISSUE 6: Inability to vote after six years abroad

After six years overseas, Australians are removed from the electoral roll. This is not what countries like Canada, the United Kingdom or the United States of America do. It has made me, as an Australian in my sixth year abroad, who is in fear of my ability to come home due to COVID-19 next year, fear statelessness and voicelessness.

Recommendation 6:

Allow citizens abroad to remain on the electoral roll.

ISSUE 7: Lack of mask compliance among staff managing repatriation

When Australians repatriate, they have often had to be in proximity to unmasked federal and state employees and contractors at the airport, in transit to quarantine, and in quarantine. Unless N94 or a similar grade, masks are a courtesy to contain potentially contagious COVID-19 so repatriates are sometimes exposed to what could be asymptomatic infectious workers on Australian soil. Reading reports in the Victorian COVID-19 Hotel Quarantine Inquiry raising alarm at mask non-compliance still usual in NSW has been baffling for me.

Recommendation 7A:

Airport staff including Australian Border Force wear masks.

Recommendation 7B:

Quarantine bus drivers wear masks.

Recommendation 7C:

NSW Police assisting in quarantine wear masks.

Recommendation 7D:

Australian Defence Force personnel assisting in quarantine wear masks.

Recommendation 7E:

Quarantine guards wear masks.

Recommendation 7F:

Quarantine hotel staff wear masks.

ISSUE 8: Risk of contracting COVID-19 while in quarantine

While the hotels used for quarantine are surreally upmarket, there is almost never ventilation in the form of fresh air. COVID-19 is an airborne pathogen and in hotel quarantine the air circulates between the rooms and also the hallway. People in quarantine report smelling it when repatriates in other rooms apply perfumed body spray. The August 28, 2020, episode of the ABC podcast Coronacast said Australian quarantine airflow carried some infection risk, in the same way as the airborne pathogens of Legionnaire's disease infect people through ducted airflow.

Please see this related article by Professor Susan Roaf, published August 7, 2020, in The Conversation, titled *Open windows to help stop the spread of coronavirus.*

Recommendation 8:

Quarantine where the windows open for ventilation.

ISSUE 9: Government reporting

Federal and state reports and statements refer to repatriates as 'overseas travellers', marking us as frivolous holiday makers. I hope this was not mischievous, because it helped create a public perception that repatriates are irresponsible and unworthy of help.



It has come to pass that what the government actually foreshadowed when they communicated, “return home while commercial options are available,” was, “return home while we allow commercial airlines continue to fly you.”

I am aware of no other country with functioning airports that is blocking repatriation by citizens — only Australia. It is galling to hear members of the federal government and consular staff say they are doing everything they can to help stranded Australians because the 4,000 passenger a week flight cap is an existential threat to us, easily lifted if the federal government assumes its responsibilities for international borders and quarantine.

Winding up an established life overseas responsibly in a few weeks is difficult. To suggest people who could not or did not flee home in March, 2020, are unworthy of governmental protection is cruel and lacks compassion. To have this view parroted by so many members of the public means it either reflects our national character or people have been proselytised by our government to believe it.

Please see this related article by Sarah Martin and Katharine Murphy, published March 17, 2020, in The Guardian, titled *Government urges Australians overseas to return home as borders close around the world.*

- • • • • Recommendation 10A:
- Remove Australia-imposed barriers to repatriation.
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- Demonstrate compassion for Australians stranded overseas.
- • • • • Recommendation 10C:
- Teach compassion explicitly in the national primary school curriculum.

In conclusion, I think the Australian federal government should have coordinated repatriation issues from the beginning, as they did with Wuhan-based repatriates in January and February, and should do so now. I think repatriates, on landing under our own steam on uncapped flights, should be transported to federal quarantine facilities at our own expense. I often say, “fly me to Woomera in an ugly plane and feed me Weetbix for two weeks,” and I mean it.

For cynical reasons, I fear my government has Australians abroad like us where they want us if we cannot repatriate. I think we are seen as a drain on the public purse because we

may claim welfare, we will use Medicare, and we probably will not vote for the government that blocked our entry to our own country when the next election comes.

I think the one benefit of this pandemic is that this influx of repatriating Australians and our partners and children is like a reverse brain drain that will make our country richer. We are diverse and will bring the compassion and other qualities that we learned overseas home with us. But only if we can *get* home.

Thank you.

Lucy Morrell