

# **CHAPTER 4**

## **COMMUNICATION, POLICY FORMULATION, AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT**

4.1 In the course of the inquiry the Committee received evidence that expatriate Australians have a wide range of concerns, including taxation issues, superannuation, medical insurance, social security, and repatriation. This chapter, however, focusses on evidence of a single overarching concern about difficulties obtaining access to information, in relation to all of these issues. Many felt that governments, in particular the Federal Government, could be doing a much better job of disseminating information and communicating with expatriates.

4.2 This chapter also discusses concerns that there is a lack of coordination of government policy in relation to expatriates. Specific areas of concern in relation to policy areas are discussed in following chapters.

### **Communication, access to information, and use of the Internet**

4.3 Expatriates are affected by, and need information about, a wide range of government services, including:

- citizenship;
- voting eligibility and access;
- taxation;
- social security;
- agreements with other countries about taxation, social security, working holidays and other matters;
- expatriate return schemes; and
- Australian consular services in the country in which they reside.

4.4 In this age of sophisticated information technology, the Internet is a key source of information about government services. Many Australians, both resident and non-resident, use the Internet to obtain information about and interact with government. For those Australians living overseas the Internet is crucial as a source of information.

4.5 Concern was expressed during the course of the inquiry that it was often difficult for expatriates to find relevant information online because services were provided by a wide range of departments and agencies, and it was often a challenge trying to pinpoint exactly where to go. The SCG submitted that:

While the standard of the individual Australian Government websites is very high by world standards, there are very few links between websites and to the uninitiated seeker of information they represent a tangled web which is difficult to penetrate without a detailed understanding of the Administrative Arrangements Order and the machinery and structure of Government.<sup>1</sup>

4.6 The SCG also observed that navigating this 'tangled web' of government websites is difficult even for those living in Australia, and the difficulties are multiplied for those outside Australia who do not have the ability to drop into a local shopfront.<sup>2</sup> Telephoning a toll-free number which is only accessible within Australia is also not an option.

### *A web portal?*

4.7 The submission from Advance - Australian Professionals in America (Advance) pointed out that there was a need for a central web portal targeted at expatriates:

There is no comprehensive portal which provides resources, via one portal (and not through a range of government departments), with respect to issues and materials of interest to expats, particularly those wishing to return home (e.g., re-entry requirements for spouses / partners; job opportunities; transferability of pension entitlements; taxation issues etc.).<sup>3</sup>

4.8 The Committee notes that the Federal Government maintains the website [www.australia.gov.au](http://www.australia.gov.au), which is the primary gateway for Australian government services and information. It includes (after navigating three clicks into the website) a page titled 'Australians Abroad'. Whilst this webpage is useful, it functions merely as a collection of links to government departments and agencies. DFAT's [www.smartraveller.gov.au](http://www.smartraveller.gov.au) website also includes a page of links, as well as a page of 'Essential information for Australians living and working overseas'. Again, however, it is difficult to navigate to these pages, with their presence not apparent when looking at the 'smartraveller' home page.

4.9 The Committee notes that the Federal Government has recognised the need to create and maintain dedicated web portals for specific groups of Australians. Under the 'Customer Focussed Portals Framework', a number of web portals have been developed which allow easy online access to government information and services for specific customer groups, in the one place, without users having to know which government agency to contact.

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1 *Submission 665*, p. 151.

2 *ibid.*

3 *Submission 676*, p. 37.

4.10 According to the body responsible for these web portals, the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO), the framework has been developed in recognition of the rapid growth of the Internet and the confusion that may result for users when trying to find information.<sup>4</sup> This new framework is in addition to the Australian government's existing web presence:

These portals will not replace the existing set of agency-based and subject-oriented websites. The portals will complement these sites and place them in a customer-oriented framework.<sup>5</sup>

4.11 Web portals already developed include sites for the following groups:

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|------------------------|--|
| Regional Australians   | <a href="http://www.regionalaustralia.gov.au">www.regionalaustralia.gov.au</a> |
| Seniors                | <a href="http://www.seniors.gov.au">www.seniors.gov.au</a>                     |
| Indigenous Australians | <a href="http://www.indigenous.gov.au">www.indigenous.gov.au</a>               |
| Families               | <a href="http://www.families.gov.au">www.families.gov.au</a>                   |
| Community groups       | <a href="http://www.community.gov.au">www.community.gov.au</a>                 |

4.12 The web portals are specifically created for their customer groups, and each has been developed by a consortium of agencies headed by a lead agency. The Community Portal, for example, is administered by the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS). The portals include informative pages on issues of relevance, written specifically for the target group by the responsible agency, rather than just providing a link to that responsible agency. Some of the portals include additional capabilities, such as the ability for groups to have their own websites linked in to the portal (for example the Families Portal), and the inclusion of a discussion board, where users can discuss issues and share ideas (for example the Regional Portal).

4.13 The Committee notes that expatriate Australians are a growing customer group that would greatly benefit from the existence of a web portal. This is especially so, given that physical distance prevents them from access to government offices. A web portal for expatriates could include the following:

- news from Australia directly relevant to expatriates, for example regarding changes in citizenship laws, voting registration for overseas voters, and changes in tax law relevant to overseas taxpayers;
- links to websites of expatriate groups and community forums;

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4 AGIMO website <http://www.agimo.gov.au/services/portals/> (accessed 26 November 2004).

5 'Customer Focussed Portal Framework', available at AGIMO website <http://www.agimo.gov.au/services/portals/framework> (accessed 26 November 2004).

- links to professional groups that foster interaction between expatriates and their counterparts in Australia;
- links to state government websites that give information about state-sponsored schemes for creating business and professional linkages between expatriates and Australian academic institutions and business groups;
- discussion forums for expatriates;
- information about all government services that affect expatriates, such as taxation, superannuation, and health insurance; and
- links to overseas missions, and to mission-based online profile registration as discussed below.

4.14 The SCG and Advance also suggested that a regular email newsletter could be issued with news of particular interest to expatriates, such as changes in legislation affecting them, and arrangements for forthcoming elections.<sup>6</sup> Expatriates could subscribe to this newsletter through the web portal.

#### ***Enhancing mission websites?***

4.15 The Committee received evidence of useful collaborations between expatriate Australians and their local foreign missions in promoting Australia's interests overseas. Evidence was also received, however, that there was potential for improved communication between mission staff and expatriates. This matter, and discussion of the wider issue of the relationship between overseas posts and Australian expatriate communities is discussed in Chapter 9.

4.16 The Committee notes that websites for Australian foreign missions include a range of information for Australians overseas, and all include a link to the DFAT online registration service (ORAO). As discussed earlier in this report, ORAO is focussed on the need to be able to contact Australians in the event of an emergency.

4.17 The Committee considers that there is potential for missions to engage more with local Australian expatriates, and at the same time to better utilise their skills. Consideration should be given to a system of online registration additional to ORAO, whereby expatriates could register online with their local mission. This arrangement would allow expatriate Australians to register as having specialist skills in certain areas or professions, or as working or living in particular geographic regions.

4.18 The establishment of such a system of online profile registration would enable missions to establish a useful database of skilled local Australian expatriates, available to be called on in relation to activities promoting Australia and Australian business. Missions could also use this register to provide notification of upcoming events and

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6 SCG, *Submission 665*, p. 153; Advance, *Submission 676*, p. 48.

business opportunities. The Committee notes DFAT's concerns that any expansion of the departmental emergency-contact focussed ORAO registration service may undermine the effectiveness of ORAO as a crisis management tool.<sup>7</sup> The proposed profile database should not affect ORAO: it would be separate from ORAO and would be mission-based.

4.19 The Committee notes that at least one government at the state level has responded to the expatriate phenomenon, and has initiated a system of online profile registration as part of its response. The Victorian government has established a multi-purpose network, the Victorian Expat Network (VEN), with a website which aims to facilitate international collaboration, build business opportunities and encourage knowledge exchange. The website allows members of the network to register their skills profiles online. Some 300 members have registered with VEN, half of whom are based in the US.<sup>8</sup> The network also provides expatriate members with news and information about Victoria and issues monthly electronic newsletters.

### **Lack of coordination of government policy**

4.20 A number of submissions observed that issues of concern to expatriates were the responsibility of many different government agencies. Some also expressed concern that there was no coordination of government policy. This was despite evidence that the expatriate population is large, and continuing to grow. For the many expatriates who felt very strongly linked with Australia, this lack of recognition added to a sense of exclusion. The SCG submitted:

... responsibility for the many and varied issues of concern to [expatriates] [is] fragmented across a wide range of Commonwealth Government agencies. Frequently one feels there is a culture in the agencies that follows the over there, out of mind philosophy that seems to be prevalent in the general populace. Add to this the difficulty in tracking down information at the State and local government level, and it is not surprising that many in the Diaspora have a feeling of exclusion from their homeland.<sup>9</sup>

4.21 The sense of exclusion created by a perceived lack of government coordination of service delivery translates into a wider, symbolic sense of being left out. The Lowy report describes the way the leaders of some countries reach out and embrace their expatriate populations rhetorically, making addresses affirming their citizens abroad as 'a rich source of international influence and goodwill' (Ireland),<sup>10</sup> and as

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7 DFAT, *Submission 646*, p. 7.

8 Ms Faye Burton, *Committee Hansard*, 28 July 2004, p. 27.

9 *Submission 665*, p. 152.

10 Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern quoted in the Lowy report, p. 47.

'ambassadors in the countries you have chosen to make home.' (India)<sup>11</sup> The Lowy report contrasts this inclusive approach with the 'muted' response of Australia's leaders:

Australian leaders ... have been relatively muted on the subject of the diaspora. Prime Minister John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer have spoken about the importance of protecting Australians abroad, but there has been no coordinated effort to embrace the diaspora rhetorically.<sup>12</sup>

4.22 The Lowy report suggests that Australia's national leaders need to articulate clearly the value Australia places on its expatriates, thus drawing them 'more fully into the mainstream of our national life.'<sup>13</sup>

4.23 A number of submitters called for the development of a formal expatriates policy by the Federal Government. Professor Hugo was one of them. In an increasingly globalising world, and with roughly one-twentieth of our population not within our national borders, he saw the need for a policy which paved the way for a greater inclusion of expatriates in the national culture and which increased the strength of the linkages between expatriates and Australia.<sup>14</sup>

4.24 Professor Hugo also called for more research into the expatriates phenomenon to assist with policy development.<sup>15</sup> The Advance organisation noted the trends revealed by Professor Hugo's initial research and called for additional demographic research to complete the profile of the Australian expatriate community. Advance further recommended research to establish the economic contribution of the expatriate community to Australia.<sup>16</sup>

4.25 Advance submitted that a coordinated approach to expatriates policy was needed:

We recommend Australia develop a comprehensive emigration policy. This policy needs to consider the following issues:

- Means to ensure that Australia remains an attractive destination for the world's professionals, scientists, artists and entrepreneurs and home grown talent in particular;

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11 Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee quoted in the Lowy report, p. 47.

12 Lowy report, p. 47.

13 *ibid.*, p. 47.

14 Hugo report, p. 72.

15 *Committee Hansard*, 28 July 2004, p. 4.

16 *Submission 675*, p. 48.

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- Means to ensure that Australians abroad are assisted in keeping in touch with Australia, its interests, development and endeavours;
  - Obstacles to the return of home grown talent are removed;
  - Active strategies are employed to engage Australians abroad in Australian commercial, artistic and scientific development of Australia.<sup>17</sup>

4.26 A number of suggestions were made as to ways to address this lack of coordination of policy. Some submissions referred to measures taken by other countries regarding their expatriates, and drew attention to the existence in some countries of administrative and policy units dedicated to expatriates' affairs. Chapter 8 of this report considers arrangements in other countries.

4.27 Several proposals were made to the Committee for some kind of Federal Government unit dedicated to coordination and development of policy in relation to Australian expatriates. Advance recommended a unit for expatriate affairs, under the foreign affairs or science and technology portfolios, with a steering committee comprising representation from Austrade, Invest Australia, the Australian Tourism Commission, the Australian Wine Bureau, and the departments covering education, technology, industry and science.<sup>18</sup>

4.28 Professor Hugo also saw merit in the establishment of a coordinating unit across several government agencies, probably residing administratively under DFAT.<sup>19</sup> In identifying the lack of a coordinated government approach to interacting with the expatriate community, the Lowy report argued that the bureaucratic focus needed to be sharpened, and recommended the creation of a coordinating unit within DFAT.<sup>20</sup>

4.29 While recognising the need for a coordinating body, the SCG took a slightly different administrative approach, recommending the establishment of an 'Australian diaspora council' to coordinate legislation and policy directly affecting Australians overseas.<sup>21</sup> Ms Anne MacGregor expanded on the proposal:

What we would like to see initially established is some type of council with representatives from Australian agencies and, perhaps, important Australian community groups, as well as Australian groups and individuals overseas ... that would firstly be a focal point for, perhaps, developing a web portal that coordinated all the useful information from all the different agencies and other organisations. There could also be a point of reference for those who

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17 *Submission 676*, p. 47.

18 *Submission 676*, p. 48.

19 *Committee Hansard*, 28 July 2004, p. 8.

20 Lowy report, pp. 49-50.

21 Mr John MacGregor, SCG, *Committee Hansard*, 29 July 2004, p. 3.

had particular diaspora issues. Complaints and suggestions and so forth could be focused and sent in to that body. That body could also conduct research as to how the diaspora might be politically represented in Australia in the long term ...<sup>22</sup>

4.30 In response to the suggestion of a dedicated expatriates unit, a representative of DFAT commented:

The question of whether a case can be made for some part of the bureaucracy here to manage the interests of the expatriate community is not something that DFAT has given any particular thought to, but I think it would depend very much on how you defined the role of that kind of body.<sup>23</sup>

4.31 The DFAT representative went on to comment that any role involving the advocacy of the interests of Australian expatriates was 'well beyond the competency of DFAT'.<sup>24</sup>

4.32 Suggestions were also made for dedicated representation of expatriates at the ministerial level. The Australian New Zealand American Chambers of Commerce (ANZACC) called for the appointment of a junior minister to represent the special interests of expatriates, an appointment which 'would be a clear signal to Australian expatriates that the government is taking their needs seriously'.<sup>25</sup> Representatives of the Victorian Government put forward a similar proposal, telling the Committee:

[Appointment of a minister] would provide recognition of the role that the expatriate community can play as ambassadors for Australia, enable the development of a coordinated policy and strategies for maximising the value of the expatriate community to Australia's economic, social and cultural interests, and augment the efforts of state governments and the private sector and encourage resource-sharing and coordination of efforts between the Commonwealth and the states.<sup>26</sup>

4.33 The Committee notes the suggestions put forward, and agrees that there is a need for a coordinated Federal Government response to address the needs and concerns of the growing community of Australians living overseas. The increasing global movement of Australian citizens has ramifications not just for Australia's place in the global economy, but also for our understanding of ourselves as Australians and how as a society we embrace our citizenry. As such there is a clear role for the Federal Government.

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22 *Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2004, p. 6.

23 *Committee Hansard*, 29 July 2004, p. 19.

24 *ibid.*

25 Mr Ron Delmenico, ANZACC, *Committee Hansard*, 28 July 2004, p. 39.

26 Ms Barbara Montjouris, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Victoria, *Committee Hansard*, 28 July 2004, p. 28.



4.34 The Committee supports calls for the establishment of a policy coordination unit focussed on expatriate affairs within the Federal Government, specifically within DFAT. As evidence in the following chapters will illustrate, there are many issues of concern for expatriates which reflect the need for such a body.

