

CHAPTER 6

REPATRIATION AND RELATED CONCERNS

*One of the enduring features of all diaspora is return migration to the homeland.*¹

6.1 This chapter examines the following issues:

- do expatriates want to return to Australia? And will they?
- should there be assistance for repatriates?; and
- realities of expatriation.

Do expatriates want to return to Australia? And will they?

6.2 The Hugo survey showed that, overall, half the respondents expressed an intention to return to Australia at some stage; a third of the remainder were undecided. Respondents in the US and Canada were the least likely to come back; the most likely to return were those based in Asia, with over 60 per cent stating their intention to do so. Young expatriates were more likely to express an intention to return than their older compatriots.²

6.3 A considerable number of the submitters to this inquiry were ambivalent about returning to Australia. As Mr Mark Gough told the Committee, 'I want the lifestyle, the weather, my family' but he had to weigh that against the 'breath of fresh air that is the international work arena'.³

6.4 Of the large number of submitters who indicated they expected to return to Australia at some time in the future, lifestyle and family reasons predominated. As Mr Kenneth Mackenzie told the Committee, 'The Australian lifestyle and climate will eventually bring me back, probably when we decide to start a family'.⁴ Ms Rachel Matthews was another to nominate the start of her family as the likely time she would return;⁵ while Ms Susan Moriarty echoed the widely held belief that Australia was a better place to raise a family.⁶

6.5 In evidence to the Committee, Ms Elena Douglas of Advance stated:

1 G Hugo, 'International mobility of the highly skilled', in FQ Wood, ed, *Beyond Brain Drain*, UNE, 2004, p. 82.

2 Hugo report, p. 50.

3 *Submission 557*, p. 2.

4 *Submission 23*.

5 *Submission 293*, p. 2.

6 *Submission 149*, p. 1.

... anecdotally it does appear that the decision to return is often not career based. Particularly for people in the United States, it is most unlikely that a superior role – certainly in the income sense – will be what they are coming to here. It would be very rare for people to be returning to a high-income bracket. Certainly the children and partner decision-making is key ... a key opportunity for the Australian government, if it wants to get people to return, is the hook of grandparents, the beautiful lifestyle and the wonderful beaches.⁷

6.6 As Professor Hugo pointed out, and as many submissions corroborated, a significant barrier to return for many was the circumstances of their partner. Given the preponderance of persons between the ages of 24 and 39 leaving Australia for extended stays, partnering overseas with an overseas national must be regarded as a distinct possibility. In the Hugo survey, of those respondents with a spouse or partner, only 30.6 per cent of the spouse/partners were Australian-born. Respondents with spouses born overseas were not as likely to return to Australia as those with Australian-born spouses. Respondents whose spouses held Australian citizenship (68.6 per cent) or dual citizenship (55 per cent) were the most likely to have plans to return to Australia.

6.7 Respondents to the Hugo survey who stated they intended to return to Australia to live overwhelmingly gave two reasons for doing so: lifestyle (82.9 per cent) and family (71.5 per cent).

6.8 The Hugo survey respondents who were undecided about returning to Australia or who did not intend to do so included the following reasons for their decision:⁸

Table 6.1 Reasons given for decision not to return to Australia

Reasons	Percentage
Better employment opportunities overseas	45.4
Established in current location	40.9
Career, promotional opportunities overseas	40.8
Higher income overseas	40.4
Marriage/partnership issues	38.6
Lifestyle more attractive overseas	30.6
Partner's employment	26.4

Source: Emigration Survey 2002

7 *Committee Hansard*, 27 July 2004, p. 19.

8 Hugo report, p. 53.

6.9 Professor Hugo noted that the age of respondents to his survey appeared to be a major determinant of intention to return. Older respondents were less likely to want to return than were the younger ones.⁹ This was not entirely supported by submitters to this inquiry. Of those who addressed the matter, there was considerable support for a return to Australia in retirement, at whatever monetary cost in terms of lost or reduced superannuation entitlements or taxation challenges.

6.10 There were other life points at which a return to Australia was likely, according to the submissions received. As noted above, starting or bringing up a family in Australia was a popular choice.¹⁰

Assistance for repatriation?

6.11 In Chapter 9, the Committee considers the various federal and state schemes for inducing highly skilled expatriates in specific disciplines to return to Australia. In the Committee's view, they are clearly in Australia's interests and should be supported, at federal, state and local level, as circumstances dictate. The Committee does not support untargeted schemes to induce other expatriates to return.

6.12 Mr Timothy Nelsen, who has studied the public policy implications of return migration, canvassed the possible government options for encouraging return migration, including staying in touch with expatriates and offering incentives such as covering travel costs and tax relief on business start-up.¹¹ Other submitters suggested that expatriates should be offered tax breaks¹² and housing assistance to entice them to return. The Committee does not support such proposals.

6.13 Evidence suggests that about half our expatriates will return to Australia at some stage. The Committee notes the view offered by Mr Timothy Heslen in his study of return migration, that 'the Australian diaspora is more likely to return of its own accord rather than having any kind of forcing from government policies'.¹³ Expatriates will probably return at particular points in their life cycles, for example, to start a family, to educate children, or to retire. In addition there are late-career repatriates, enticed by the various inducements on offer and there are an unknown number of impromptu repatriations, necessitated by family or other crises. The Australian lifestyle and family-related matters which will draw them back are largely matters over which the Federal Government has little control.

9 *ibid*, p. 50.

10 See, for example, Mr Patrick Mitchell, *Submission 205*, Ms Lucy Van Der Wall, *Submission 556*.

11 Mr Timothy Neslen, *Submission 52*, p. 41.

12 Mr Andrew Wettern, *Submission 457*.

13 Mr Timothy Neslen, *Submission 52*, p. 40.

Realities of repatriation

6.14 The Committee notes that those returning to Australia had mixed repatriation experiences. Mr John Werry from VEN recounted the following example:

... one of our colleagues used to work in Brussels and recently came back to Australia to work in our department. He spent a year engineering his return. By using some of our government departments and working through the Victorian Expatriate Network, he ... reconnected himself into the Victorian professional community in health care and micro and nanotechnologies. He returned and seems to have very few problems, and he thoroughly recommends that as a way of approaching it – spending some time while you are over there reconnecting yourself so that it is a smooth transition.¹⁴

6.15 The Committee was unable to pinpoint the proportion of repatriates who experienced problems on resettlement. It is possible that many who have slotted comfortably back into life in Australia did not have the inclination to make a submission to the Committee's inquiry. As Ms Anne MacGregor indicated, the SCG also probably heard more from the people who were unhappy.¹⁵ Yet the picture most frequently received by the Committee was that of repatriation difficulties:

Repatriation is a major life transition that is complex and inherently stressful. Relocation in general (whether as an Expatriate or as a Repatriate) has been shown to be one of the top ten causes of stress and Repatriates often go through what is known as "reverse culture shock", experiencing feelings such as confusion, anxiety and alienation.¹⁶

6.16 Most support groups attribute the difficulties faced by repatriates to a generally hostile stay-at-home population, resentful of the repatriates' success (if achieved), unreceptive to their travellers' tales, and unwilling to respond positively to suggestions as to how things might be done differently. While undoubtedly there is an element of truth in this, recent research commissioned by the Lowy Institute for International Policy has shown Australians are growing sanguine about their fellow countrymen who have chosen to go overseas. Some 91 per cent of those surveyed considered expatriates to be adventurous people prepared to try their luck overseas; only 10 per cent felt they had let their fellow Australians down by leaving Australia. And the attitude of the younger generation was significantly more positively inclined towards expatriates than were their seniors. Some 73 per cent of respondents under the age of 30 considered long-term expatriates to be 'real' Australians, while only 38 per cent of respondents over the age of 65 did so.¹⁷

14 *Committee Hansard*, 28 July 2004, p. 31.

15 *Committee Hansard*, 4 August 2004, p. 4.

16 *Connectivity, Submission 644*, p. 2.

17 Lowy Institute for International Policy, *Australians' Attitudes to Expatriates: preliminary opinion poll research*, UMR Research, 2004.

6.17 Ms Catherine Rawson, a self-described 'serial expatriate', stated that hostility towards expatriates was once common:

Many expat Australians complain that they feel stay-at-home Aussies perceive them as disloyal for having left home to live and work abroad. This parochial attitude once existed – I remember Joan Sutherland being challenged on TV in this vein - but I think it is on the wane now.¹⁸

6.18 While outright hostility may be a thing of the past, community indifference or lack of understanding of the repatriates' situation appears to be still prevalent. The solution Ms Rawson found was the following:

I learnt early that I must accept responsibility for fostering relationships at home. Most of my friends and former colleagues have limited interest in hearing of my experiences abroad. Luckily, I'm glad to catch up with their news and don't feel the need for them to reciprocate in equal measure. This attitude seems to be the key to easy reintegration.¹⁹

6.19 The Committee notes that modern communication technology and the growth of the Internet is making it increasingly easier for expatriates to maintain links whilst living overseas, which in turn is likely to improve their experience on repatriation.

Employment

6.20 The single most disheartening experience of repatriation for some was the difficulty in finding employment back in Australia. Miss Adrienne Farrelly told the Committee that:

Australian industries just do not recognise or value ... international experience.²⁰

6.21 Or as Dr Rowan Gilmore, himself a repatriate, put it:

... from the expatriates' point of view, it is a case of managing expectations. After [they] get over [culture] shock and the shock of the tax system and the shock of salaries, expats come back with a pretty powerful looking resume that often does not count for a whole bunch because of the Australian culture, to a certain extent ... The biggest problem in repatriating is the lack of networks and the lack of intimate knowledge of the system in Australia.²¹

6.22 Now back overseas, Ms Ellen Sanders reflected on her repatriation attempt. She was fortunate enough that her old job was held open for her for 18 months while she was away, but on her return she found that the position had changed and that she

18 *Submission 650.*

19 *ibid.*

20 *Committee Hansard, 28 July 2004, p. 16.*

21 *Committee Hansard, 27 July 2004, p. 8.*

had grown, and after her international experience she found the job 'stifling', managers without overseas experience found her presence 'threatening', and never called on her new skills.²² Not surprisingly, she moved on.

6.23 One repatriate support group, the Melbourne International Social Group, told the Committee that about 70 per cent of its 300 members were unemployed:

These are all professional people who have many years of experience, both in Australia and overseas. There are many of them who have been struggling to find jobs for well over a year ... there is something wrong – whether it is with our culture or our structures – such that we have this wasted human and intellectual capital, who are desperate to find jobs and desperate to contribute to Australia but who are finding that they are simply not valued.²³

6.24 Mr John Surtees questioned whether it was the recruitment process that was at fault, asking whether recruitment agencies regarded international experience as effectively 'a gap in a resume which is otherwise hitherto unexplained'.²⁴ Even those who were successful in finding work were often disappointed in the job they found, as it so rarely provided an opportunity to make use of their range of skills and experience.²⁵

6.25 About half the jobs advertised in Australia are now advertised online. The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations runs an online job databank,²⁶ which should provide expatriates with a reasonable overview of the opportunities available. Linking expatriates, and particularly expatriates with more entrepreneurial skills, with appropriate work opportunities in Australia could obviously be assisted through specifically targeted networks.

6.26 The Committee notes the view that the most important step for any expatriate intending to return at some stage, but most particularly during working years, is to foster and maintain connections with the homeland. Maintaining connections with alumni groups, and with professional and industry associations, is much easier these days via the Internet. While networks can probably go only a short way towards preparing expatriates for the culture shocks they may experience on their return, they certainly should be able to offer an increasing amount of help in finding work, accommodation and general information about services.

6.27 While there are commonalities amongst repatriates in the repatriation experience, there are also major differences, depending in part on the reasons for the

22 *Submission 312*, p. 2.

23 Ms Cynthia Balogh, *Committee Hansard*, 28 July 2004, p. 21.

24 *Committee Hansard*, 28 July 2004, p. 24.

25 See, for example, *Submission 373*.

26 See www.jobsearch.gov.au.

repatriation, the length of time away and the degree of connection maintained with Australia during the expatriation period. It seems to the Committee that, having tasted the advantages of an overseas lifestyle and weighed that up against the family and lifestyle opportunities here, many expatriates and repatriates will live out their lives tinged with mild regret that they cannot be in two places at once.

6.28 The Committee is surprised at the level of disappointment of many repatriates concerning the job opportunities available to them on their return to Australia. Many of them left Australia precisely because of the greater employment opportunities on the world stage, the higher incomes, the greater job satisfaction, or the enhanced career opportunities. Even if they have returned to Australia, as many undoubtedly have, with more experience, enhanced skills, better contacts, and greater cross-cultural understanding, this does not necessarily mean that openings will have developed in Australia in their absence.

6.29 The Committee notes that non-government groups have sprung up to support expatriates, to assist them to settle in to overseas locations, and to provide socialisation opportunities. The Committee also notes that organisations such as the Melbourne International Social Group have started up in Australia to help repatriates, and expects that similar groups will develop. In addition, a number of companies offer services on a commercial basis to assist those repatriating.

