

CHAPTER 10

THE COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS

10.1 It is clear to the Committee that those who make up the large global community of expatriate Australians feel very strong links with their homeland, despite the physical distance that separates them from our shores. This is true for many, whether they are the so-called 'gold-collar workers' employed in highly-skilled professional jobs, or whether they are migrants who have returned to their country of origin after many decades of living in Australia.

10.2 Australia as a nation needs to reach out and embrace its expatriate population. Not only are they a part of our nation, but as many have stated, they are our ambassadors-at-large. The growth in the size of the Australian expatriate community reflects the increasingly mobile and globalised world in which we live. Expatriates can play a vital role in increasing Australia's foothold in world markets.

10.3 The Internet has made it much easier for expatriates to stay in touch with news and developments in Australia. Many, however, feel a sense of exclusion; that they are 'over there, out of mind'. This is especially so when expatriates attempt to deal with Australian government agencies and find it difficult to access information and services. The Federal Government has a clear role in providing services to these Australians.

10.4 It is important that Australia reaches out and engages with the expatriate community. The nation's leaders have a clear role in articulating the inclusion of expatriates in Australian society, and expressing the value of expatriates to Australia.

Communication and access to information

10.5 A recurrent theme in evidence to the inquiry was the concern of expatriates over difficulties experienced accessing government information from a distance, and the sense that they were forgotten once they left Australia. Despite living in a world of high-tech communications and sophisticated Internet connections, Australian expatriates around the world regularly experience frustration when trying to contact Australian government agencies, or when attempting to find out information for themselves on websites provided by governments.

10.6 Governments have a responsibility to provide information, and to provide it in a way that is accessible. In the age of the Internet, and with over three-quarters of a million Australians living overseas, it is difficult to understand why the Australian Government does not have a central web portal to cater to the needs and concerns of such a large group. This is especially so, given the fact that unlike other groups, Australians living overseas do not have the option of phoning the toll-free numbers of agencies such as the Australian Tax Office, for example, or of visiting their nearest Centrelink Office.

10.7 As discussed in Chapter 4, the Federal Government has recognised the need to create and maintain dedicated web portals for specific groups of Australians. Under the Government's 'Customer Focussed Portals Framework', a number of web portals have already 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. Web portals have already been developed for specific groups of Australians including seniors, Indigenous Australians, and Australians living in regional areas.

10.8 Expatriates are a large customer group needing access to government information and services. Their needs and concerns cannot be ignored by government. The Committee is strongly of the view that expatriate Australians would greatly benefit from the existence of a web portal, and that a web portal for expatriates should be included in the Government's Customer Focussed Portals Framework.

10.9 A primary purpose for an expatriates web portal would be to provide information about government services targeted and focussed towards expatriates, and news of changes in legislation affecting expatriates. In addition, an expatriates web portal could include links to websites of expatriate groups and forums, and to professional groups and networks that foster interaction between expatriates and their counterparts in Australia.

Recommendation 1

10.10 The Committee recommends that the Australian Government establish a web portal devoted to the provision of information and services for expatriate Australians. A suggested name for the portal is www.expats.gov.au. The Committee recommends that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should be the lead agency in the development and administration of the expatriates web portal.

Policy formulation and coordination

10.11 The Committee agrees with suggestions by many who made submissions to the inquiry that there is a need for a body dedicated to developing and coordinating policy as it relates to Australian expatriates. Responsibility for the needs of expatriates lies across many departments and agencies. Although existing frameworks of government administration may have worked well enough to date, it is clear that expatriates must be recognised as a growing segment of the Australian population that cannot be ignored, and for whom governments must develop specific policy.

10.12 There is clearly a need to coordinate Commonwealth policy in some way. The sense of exclusion from Australian society felt by many Australians living overseas is heightened by the absence of any organised approach by government to their particular needs and requirements.

10.13 The Committee supports calls for the establishment within the Federal Government, of a policy coordination unit focussed on expatriate affairs. The many

issues of concern raised during the course of the inquiry and discussed in this report illustrate the need for such a coordinating body.

Recommendation 2

10.14 The Committee recommends the establishment of a policy unit within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, to facilitate the coordination of policies relating to Australian expatriates. Responsibilities of the policy unit should include:

- **formulation of a coordinated policy regarding expatriates;**
- **consultation with groups from the expatriate community, industry, academia and other stakeholders in the formulation of policy; and**
- **monitoring research developments and opportunities in relation to expatriates.**

10.15 In order to assist policy development relating to expatriates, the Committee recognises that it would be desirable to improve the statistical information collected about Australian expatriates. However, the Committee does not believe that it is necessary or desirable to attempt to include expatriate Australians in the Australian Census. Rather, the Committee strongly believes that the focus should be on improving the existing methods used by the ABS, DIMIA, and DFAT. The Committee considers that improving the information collected from incoming and outgoing passenger cards could prove particularly useful.

Recommendation 3

10.16 The Committee recommends that the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should continue to improve the statistical information collected in relation to Australian expatriates, particularly through the use of incoming and outgoing passenger cards.

Australian missions overseas

10.17 The Committee received evidence of much useful collaboration between expatriate Australians and their local Australian missions in promoting Australia's interests overseas. However the Committee also notes evidence that there is potential for improved communication between mission staff and expatriates, and that the level of interaction and engagement between mission staff and expatriates is inconsistent across overseas posts.

10.18 The Committee supports calls for an increased priority to be given to engagement by mission staff with expatriates, and for such engagement to be made a part of official directives to heads of missions.

10.19 An important part of mission engagement occurs when mission staff and expatriates collaborate to advance Australia's interests, for example at consular functions promoting Australian business. To facilitate this collaboration, the Committee sees significant benefits in the development by missions of a database of local expatriates.

10.20 A database would allow expatriate Australians to register as having specialist skills in certain areas or professions, or as working or living in particular geographic regions. Missions would then have access to 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 business opportunities. Such a database would be in addition to the DFAT online registration service, which is operated primarily as a way of contacting Australians in the case of emergency.

Recommendation 4

10.21 The Committee recommends that the consular role for foreign missions be revised to contain a specific requirement that posts engage with the local expatriate community, in any and all ways possible appropriate to that location.

Recommendation 5

10.22 The Committee recommends that the websites of Australia's foreign missions should include an online registration facility to enable local expatriates to register their professional profiles. The profiles database will facilitate stronger engagement between missions and expatriates, and will provide a resource for missions in their work of promoting Australia's interests overseas. It would also be used to notify expatriates of news and upcoming events.

Concerns regarding voting and citizenship rights

Citizenship issues

10.23 The Committee strongly believes that, in order to fully embrace our Australian expatriate community, the concept of Australian citizenship needs to be more inclusive. Australians living and working overseas are part of the Australian nation, and should be valued and recognised as such.

10.24 The Committee acknowledges the concerns of former Australian citizens who have had difficulties in resuming their Australian citizenship, especially those who lost their citizenship under the now repealed section 17 of the Citizenship Act, or who were forced to renounce their citizenship under section 18 of the Citizenship Act. The Committee supports the proposed changes to the Citizenship Act to rectify these situations, but considers that the proposed changes do not go far enough.

10.25 In particular, the Committee believes that all children of people who lost Australian citizenship under section 17, and children of people who renounced their citizenship under section 18, should be eligible for Australian citizenship by descent.

Recommendation 6

10.26 The Committee recommends that the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948* be amended to ensure that children of people who previously lost their citizenship under section 17 of the Citizenship Act are eligible to apply for Australian citizenship by descent.

Recommendation 7

10.27 The Committee recommends that the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948* be amended to ensure that children of people who renounced their citizenship under section 18 of the Citizenship Act are eligible to apply for Australian citizenship by descent.

10.28 Further, the Committee is concerned that Australians living overseas in countries with restrictions on dual citizenship may continue to be forced to renounce their Australian citizenship while section 18 remains in the Citizenship Act. For this reason, the Committee supports the suggestion that it is time to review section 18 of the Citizenship Act, particularly whether the provision may be disadvantageous to Australians living in countries with restrictions on dual citizenship.

Recommendation 8

10.29 The Committee recommends that the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs conduct a review of section 18 of the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948*.

10.30 The Committee acknowledges DIMIA's recent efforts to respond to certain concerns relating to the provisions of the Citizenship Act. As noted above, the Committee supports recent proposals to amend the Citizenship Act to address these some of these concerns. However, the Committee recognises that there may be other situations and circumstances relating to citizenship issues, in addition to those mentioned above, that need further detailed examination.

10.31 In particular, the Committee strongly believes that Australian citizenship law and policy needs to continue to evolve to reflect changing global conditions, and our increasingly mobile population. The Committee therefore considers that the Citizenship Act should be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that the legislation continues to reflect notions of citizenship in modern Australian society. The Committee believes that DIMIA should establish an advisory committee to assist it in reviewing this legislation.

Recommendation 9

10.32 The Committee recommends that the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs establish an advisory committee to review the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948* on an ongoing basis to ensure that the legislation appropriately reflects notions of citizenship in the 21st century.

10.33 The Committee considers that improvements could be made to the information made available to Australian expatriates in relation to citizenship. The Committee recognises DIMIA's efforts in relation to providing information relating to citizenship, but believes these efforts could be further improved where expatriates are concerned. In particular, the Committee considers that DIMIA should continually review its website with a view to providing detailed and accurate citizenship advice for Australian expatriates. The proposed web portal for expatriates should also contain information and links in relation to relevant citizenship issues, including links to the DIMIA website.

10.34 In addition, the Committee recommends that DFAT and DIMIA should work together to improve citizenship advice and services at overseas missions, and in particular to ensure that staff at DFAT's overseas posts receive appropriate training in relation to citizenship issues to enable them to handle queries about citizenship from expatriates.

10.35 Finally, the Committee considers that the Citizenship Information Phone Line administered by the DIMIA could provide better services to Australian expatriates. In particular, the Committee believes that an internationally accessible phone number should be provided for Australians living overseas.

Recommendation 10

10.36 The Committee recommends that the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs continually review its website with a view to providing more detailed, accurate and specific advice and information in relation to citizenship issues for Australian expatriates. The web portal for expatriates (proposed at Recommendation 1) should also contain information on citizenship issues, including links to the relevant parts of the website of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs.

Recommendation 11

10.37 The Committee recommends that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs work together to improve citizenship advice and services at Australian overseas missions, and in particular that the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs conduct regular training for staff in overseas missions to enable them to handle queries about citizenship from expatriates.

Recommendation 12

10.38 The Committee recommends that the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs provide an internationally accessible phone number for the Citizen Information Phone Line.

Voting issues

10.39 The Committee recognises the efforts of the AEC to improve education and awareness of enrolment and voting provisions among Australians overseas. The Committee considers that these efforts should be supported and continued.

10.40 However, the Committee believes that a greater number of expatriate Australians should be entitled to enrol, and subsequently to vote, in Australian elections. The Committee recognises that many Australians living overseas maintain their connections to Australia, and are able to keep informed in relation to Australian affairs. In particular, Internet technology means it is easier than ever for Australians overseas to keep informed of events and issues in Australia. For this reason, the Committee considers that the enrolment provisions for Australian citizens overseas should be relaxed to make it easier for expatriates to maintain their electoral enrolment (or 'EOE status'). At the same, the Committee supports the notion that such Australians should be required to demonstrate some form of continuing connection with Australia, such as having returned to Australia in recent years, along the lines of the approach taken by New Zealand.

10.41 The Committee therefore considers that Australian citizens moving or living overseas should be entitled to register as an 'Eligible Overseas Elector' if they:

- left Australia in the previous three years or have returned to Australia (for any length of time) in the past three years; and
- intend to resume residence in Australia within six years of their departure.

10.42 In the case of Australian citizens who have been living overseas for over six years, the Committee recommends that they should be entitled to renew their enrolment for up to three years at a time if they have returned to Australia (for any length of time) within the last three years.

10.43 At the same time, the Committee believes that voting should continue to be non-compulsory for overseas Australians.

Recommendation 13

10.44 The Committee recommends that the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* should be amended as follows to assist expatriate Australians to maintain their electoral enrolment:

- **Australian citizens moving or living overseas should be entitled to register as an 'Eligible Overseas Elector' if they left Australia in the previous three**

years, or have returned to Australia (for any length of time) in the past three years; and they intend to resume residence in Australia within six years of their departure; and

- **Australian citizens who have been living overseas for over six years should be entitled to renew their enrolment as an Eligible Overseas Elector if they have returned to Australia (for any length of time) within the last three years.**

Recommendation 14

10.45 The Committee recommends that voting for overseas Australians should continue to be non-compulsory.

Engagement with expatriates

10.46 The Committee recognises the benefits to be gained from maintaining links with Australian expatriates in the academic field and in the professional field, and supports and encourages schemes that encourage collaboration and networking.

10.47 The Committee is particularly encouraged by the growth in the number of expatriate networks that have been set up in recent times. These networks play an important role in linking up Australians overseas with each other, and with professional, business and social organisations in Australia. They are invaluable for facilitating networking and in providing useful information and support. The Committee supports these networks, and considers that the proposed expatriates web portal could provide a home for a listing of these networks, thus facilitating increased awareness.

Recommendation 15

10.48 The Committee recommends that the web portal devoted to the provision of information and services for expatriate Australians (proposed at Recommendation 1) should include a page of links to expatriate network websites, to facilitate engagement and information exchange in the expatriate community. The web portal should include a page where expatriate networks can apply to have their websites linked.

10.49 The Lowy report pointed out that there is potential for a greater contribution from expatriates to non-profit organisations and philanthropic causes in Australia, such as to universities and arts organisations. The Lowy report argued that Australian institutions needed to connect with potential givers overseas and maintain sustainable relationships with them. The Committee supports the recommendation of the Lowy report that non-profit organisations should pursue the fundraising opportunity offered by this potential 'pool of philanthropic income', and should combine their efforts to achieve benefits of scale.

Recommendation 16

10.50 The Committee recommends that Australian non-profit organisations such as universities and arts organisations should pursue philanthropic contributions from expatriate Australians, and should combine their efforts to achieve benefits of scale.

Senator the Hon Nick Bolkus

Chair

