

February 25, 2004

To: The Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Sir/Madam,

This submission is in response to the invitation for public comment as part of the Committee's Inquiry into Australian Expatriates.

I believe that overseas Australians and others in the Australian diaspora should be recognized and accepted as an integral part of the Australian nation and be acknowledged as constituting a significant national asset that should be fostered and developed at both the Government and private sector levels.

I left Australia in October 2000 following the completion of my doctoral studies. I initially came to Chicago, Illinois to take up a two year post-doctoral fellowship at Northwestern University. I was fortunate that my unique combination of qualifications allowed me to pursue my training at what is considered to be the leading research institution in my field. I have now been in the US for 3 years and was recently appointed to Assistant Research Professor at Northwestern University.

In moving overseas for an extended period of time, I was faced with making decisions about who I needed to notify of my absence. Some I was lucky enough to recognise for myself, such as suspending my private health insurance coverage, but others, such as the electoral office, I wasn't aware I needed to notify. Luckily my mother was able to take care of that for me after my departure. There wasn't any single source of advice, that I was aware of at the time, that I could access prior to departure for information on what to expect in making such a big move and what my rights and responsibilities in Australia would be after departure. Such a service would be most useful and could cover a multitude of issues such as voting from overseas; how to deal with Australian banks and financial institutions from overseas; what to do about wills and power of attorneys while away; Australian taxation law as applicable while overseas and any negative impact of tax laws due to expatriate status; Superannuation credits and pensions and their portability; reciprocal arrangements for driving licences; and what to do about private health insurance while away. Furthermore, it could also provide information to those returning to Australia such as repatriation of capital; repatriation and portability of pensions or superannuation credits; establishment of credit ratings and new relationships with financial institutions in Australia; support available from Government and non-Government groups to assist with repatriation; registration and qualification for various Government health, social security, and support programs; electoral re-enrolment; reciprocal arrangements for driving licences; reinstatement within the Medicare system; insurance; and transfer of health records.

I still haven't decided if I will remain here in the US long-term. However, it is a very strong possibility for the following reasons: I am at the premier research institution in my field; it is easier and less expensive to attend conferences and meetings from the US; and the potential to attract significant research funding is very good, even at such an early stage in my career. One substantial impediment to my ability to attract research funding as a Principle Investigator is that many of the federal funding agencies here in the US require the Principle Investigator to be a US citizen. Until recently I was under the impression that if, in order to facilitate my career prospects I became a US

citizen, I would lose my Australian citizenship. This misconception was reinforced by information I received from the Australian Consulate in Chicago when I applied for a new Australian passport in October 2003. At the time I was told that if as an adult I took up citizenship in another country, I would lose my Australian citizenship. Based on this, I was resigned to the fact that I would not be able to advance in my chosen career unless I parted with my Australian citizenship, something I was very reluctant to do. Luckily I've since discovered that this is no longer the case. I am grateful to those parties involved in making dual citizenship for Australians a possibility. The Australian government should ensure that all of its representative arms are providing the correct information to Australians abroad.

Obviously for me personally, there are career-related advantages to having dual citizenship. However one of the major advantages to retaining my Australian citizenship is that I have unfettered access to Australia, a country that I consider home, where my parents and family reside, and where I hope to some day return. The desire to go home is a strong one, unfortunately career-wise, my opportunities are limited by the small size, not only of the country in general, but my niche profession in particular. The research infrastructure does not exist in Australia to the same extent that it does here in the US. I recently heard of the governments Federation Grants initiative and think that it is commendable. However, I think it would be just as, and perhaps more beneficial to encourage researchers abroad to return to Australia for more frequent but shorter trips. Being able to access research funding is only part of the problem biomedical researchers like myself face. As a young researcher I want to work with others in my field, especially those who are respected for their contributions, and gain experience in well-established, well-respected, premier laboratories. These may not yet be found in Australia. Although Australia is one of the world leaders in providing advanced degrees in my field, Australian graduates are limited in where they can go within Australia once they graduate. There aren't a lot of academic institutions to choose from and movement within the academic workforce is slow. That doesn't mean that there aren't reciprocal benefits to encouraging greater collaboration between Australian researchers abroad and those at home. And repeated, short visits would be a viable way of encouraging Australian researchers abroad to give something back without having to choose between Australian and overseas opportunities.

Although I was born in Italy and moved to Australia with my family at a young age, I consider myself an Australian. It is how I identify myself to others and how others identify me, mostly because of my broad, ocker accent! I sometimes find myself feeling more Australian since moving away, than when I actually lived there. I take every opportunity to see Australian films and performers when they come to Chicago, even those that I would never have gone to see if I was at home. Since leaving Australia I've taught myself to make pavlova and I find myself explaining Aussie Rules, cricket and Australian beer to people when I've never been a big fan myself. I take more of an interest in Australian politics and events from a distance than I ever did while at home. Each and every Australian who ventures abroad is an ambassador for their country. Experiencing another society and its politics and culture makes you think of your own on a much deeper level. The cultural and political 'compare and contrast' that comes with living overseas and having people ask questions about how and why things are done Down Under leads to a broader understanding of your own heritage.

I constantly seek ways in which to maintain my connection with Australia. Since all my family still resides in Australia, I am able to stay connected through them. However, I also read the Melbourne newspapers online, sent in a postal vote during the last national election, and attend any Aussie function that I come across here in Chicago. This last effort has been facilitated greatly by recently getting involved in YAPA (Young Australian Professionals in America)

and through the Consulate in Chicago. I have been impressed with the friendliness of the consular officials and their active encouragement of my participation in their events. I don't know if all Australian consulates and embassies are as open and friendly as that in Chicago, but I would hope so. They have a personal touch to the way they carry out their duties that is commendable. I hope that the Government will find ways to support organisations such as YAPA and the cultural and social programs organised through the consulates.

I was recently made aware of the fact that my country of birth, Italy, considers it's overseas citizens of such value that they actually have representation in government! Perhaps Australia could consider similar measures to tap into and ensure appropriate representation for overseas Australians, especially as they represent such a large portion of the Australian population.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider my submission. I hope that this inquiry is successful in identifying ways in which overseas Australians can continue to be a vibrant part of Australian society and achieve the recognition and representation that they deserve. As well, I hope that avenues can be identified that lead to benefits for Australia.