

## Consular services in death spiral as trivial demands increase

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“Can you look after my dog while I'm away?” “Will the sand in Egypt upset my asthma?”

Believe it or not, these were real requests received by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade consular emergency assistance line. Together with far more serious calls for help from Australian travellers, they contribute to an increasingly unsustainable burden on the nation's consular services. It's a problem that needs to be urgently addressed, in part by imposing a levy or fee on those who travel overseas.

The demand for Australian consular services has risen at an immense rate, with three serious trends emerging. First, Australians are travelling more than ever: the number of trips we take overseas every year has doubled in the past 10 years to more than eight million.

Second, the typical profile of the Australian traveller is changing. There are an increasing number of young travellers, who are likelier to get into trouble and run out of money, as well as a rising number of older Australians, who have a greater chance of needing medical services. Last year 1181 Australians were arrested, 1265 were hospitalised and 1138 died overseas.

We're increasingly adventurous, taking more trips to far-flung places, doing extreme sports, taking gap years, buying one-way tickets and visiting exotic locations with poor local services.

Third, expectations of what the government should do for travellers have risen sharply. The rising number of Australians calling for government intervention abroad, no matter how trivial, foolhardy or avoidable their predicaments, is at odds with a nation that prides itself on its resilience and resourcefulness at home.

In the civil strife in Egypt in 2011, the government flew Australians out on charter planes at taxpayer expense. It must have been a frightening experience and the government response was swift and effective. But when strikes closed down Bangkok airport in 2008, Australia provided free planes then too; the situation was inconvenient and uncomfortable but hardly dangerous. Is this really the best use of our taxes?

In late 2011 when a young Australian got himself in trouble attempting to buy marijuana in Indonesia, the foreign minister made the case his “highest priority” and Julia Gillard spoke to the boy on the telephone. When another Australian landed in prison in Thailand after drunkenly stealing a bar mat from a Phuket bar, her husband criticised the government's response as “nowhere near good enough”. Is this what we want our prime minister and foreign minister to be spending their precious time on?

Each time the government buckles under public and media pressure to “do something” to help the latest citizen in distress, expectations are raised and become more difficult to meet.

Meanwhile, DFAT's resources are declining. Far from sipping champagne on the embassy cocktail-party circuit, consular work can be harrowing and demanding, involving everything from helping the relatives of earthquake victims to keeping watch over a corpse after a plane crash in the jungle.

It is all part of a diplomat's job. But it is fast overtaking DFAT's other important work, such as negotiating trade agreements, working with other countries to prevent terrorism and people-smuggling, and analysing political developments in countries critical to our national security.

This work is jeopardised if DFAT spends more and more of its meagre resources on consular affairs, particularly if they are squandered on answering requests for dog-minding, concert tickets or advice on asthma.

To ease the strain on Australia's consular services, three things need to happen. First, we need to take more responsibility for our actions when we travel overseas to ensure that DFAT can focus on the really serious cases. This means getting the right travel insurance, behaving responsibly and respecting local laws.

Second, ministers and our elected representatives need to extract themselves from the vicious consular cycle created by successive governments, and stop overservicing consular cases.

Finally, government needs to fund consular services properly. That money must come from somewhere, which is why we must consider a consular levy on travellers. Several countries already add a consular fee to the cost of a passport or an airline ticket. It's time for Australia to do the same. It could be as little as a \$5 fee on a plane ticket so, unlike a tax, it imposes the costs on those who are actually travelling.

If we are to continue to provide Australians with a high level of consular support abroad, as well as managing our foreign affairs effectively, we need a reality check. Government needs to find a better way of funding consular services, and Australians need to shoulder more of the responsibility themselves when they travel.

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