

Michael Fullilove & Chloë Flutter

Diplomat Survey: International Careers: Living and Working Overseas

The Diplomat, August-September 2004, pp. S10-S12

On any given day, there are approximately one million Australians outside Australia, more than three-quarters of whom live offshore on a permanent or long-term basis. In other words, there are nearly as many Australians residing offshore as there are in Tasmania and the ACT combined. This “Australian diaspora” is large and, in the main, prosperous, well-educated, well-connected, and well-disposed to this country.

Australia has always sent people out into the world. But in the last decade and a half, the number departing has increased markedly. Australia’s diaspora has risen in lockstep with the globalisation, along with the breakthroughs in technology and transport and the increased international mobility of highly skilled workers. The result is that when searching for career and life opportunities, increasing numbers of Australians are casting their eyes offshore.

The face of the diaspora

We have grown accustomed to hearing of Australians in influential international positions, including heads of iconic companies, editors of journals of record, Ivy League professors, movie stars, writers, educators, arts administrators, and even a European royal. One former US State Department official refers to this cohort as ‘the axis of ocker.’ But beneath this highly visible first tier of overseas Australians sit many other talented Australians, located in important sectors, and often in regions of strategic significance.

The Australian diaspora is made up of some of Australia’s most employable citizens. Most expatriates are of prime working age. More than half of the diaspora is aged between 25 and 44 years, compared with only 30% of the national population. They also tend to be concentrated in occupations that are in high demand in the international labour market. Relative to the general Australian population, expatriates are more concentrated in professional, manager and administrator positions and less concentrated in trade and intermediate roles. They are also, on average, better-educated and better-paid than resident Australians.

While Australian expatriates are scattered across every continent, the bulk are located in a few key places with specific historic and economic importance to Australia. Predictably, the UK is home to the largest community of Australians overseas, with nearly one quarter of our 760,000 expats. A further quarter is dispersed across continental Europe, often in countries that provided

past waves of migration to Australia, such as Greece, Italy, Turkey and Ireland. The importance of the US as a destination for Australians is increasing, with the number of Aussies residing there doubling from the mid-1990s, to over 100,000 by 2003. Asia is also a popular destination, with significant numbers of Australians in China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore and Japan. Finally, New Zealand and Canada continue to attract Australians.

Another important feature of the Australian expatriate community is that it is dynamic – it is, if you like, a “rolling diaspora”. Rather than turning their backs on Australia once and for all, Australian expats these days are more likely to move back and forward between Australia and other countries as opportunities present. A recent study by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs estimated that the average duration of time Australian expats spent living outside Australia was 2.2 years. As a consequence, expatriates remain engaged with Australia while they are away.

Foreign poppy syndrome?

If you were to judge from the noise generated by commentators and talkback callers on this question, Australians don't particularly like their expatriates. Every now and again, prominent expats will poke their heads above the parapet and promptly have them shot off for their trouble. Several months ago, a Germaine Greer article about Australian culture generated scores of letters to the editor and general outrage. The prime minister described her remarks as 'patronising' and 'elitist' and concluded: 'if she wants to stay in another country, then good luck to her.'

Other expats have received similar criticisms in recent times, raising the question of whether we are seeing a significant shift in Australian attitudes. Has the cultural pendulum, stuck for so long in the position of excessive regard for the opinion of outsiders, now swung the other way entirely? Does a foreign postcode disqualify an Australian from commenting on national affairs, and cause resentment in those of us who have been left behind? Are we in the grip of a new and more virulent strain of the tall poppy syndrome, our traditional suspicion of high-flyers and big-noters? Are we suffering from 'foreign poppy syndrome'?

As it happens, the answer is no. The Lowy Institute for International Policy commissioned UMR Research to survey one thousand Australians, and the results were striking. It turns out that Australians are far more sanguine than we might have expected about their non-resident countrymen and women. Ninety-one per cent of respondents agreed with the positive statement that expats are 'adventurous people prepared to try their luck and have a go overseas', and only

6% disagreed. Most respondents also believed that expats are successful: 75% agreed they 'are doing well for themselves away from home', and only 6% disagreed.

By contrast, only 10% of respondents believed that expats 'have let us down by leaving Australia', and a massive 86% disagreed. On the issue of long-distance lectures, only 14% of people agreed that expats 'too often delight in running Australia down from offshore', and 71% disagreed with the statement. Far from sniping at expats, then, most of us support them.

There is a second insight from the survey: the existence of a generational shift, whereby younger people are more positively inclined towards expatriates than older people are. For example, we asked about Australians who 'have been overseas for many years and have no plans to return home.' Sixty-two per cent of all respondents identified these people as 'real' Australians, while 31% did not. However the responses varied substantially depending on age: whereas 73% of respondents under the age of 30 said they thought of these long-term expats as 'real' Australians, only 38% of respondents over the age of 65 agreed.

These are significant results, but in some ways they are not surprising, as most of us have a friend or family member who is a member of the diaspora. The data does indicate, however, that the community may have a better grasp of the realities of globalisation than some of our opinion leaders.

Australia's offshore citizens represent a valuable resource: a market, a sales force, an ambassadorial corps and a constituency. Most Australians understand this. The hope is that our opinion leaders and policymakers will catch on soon, and craft some modest but intelligent policies to encourage Australian institutions to harness this national asset.

Michael Fullilove is program director, global issues at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, and Chloë Flutter is an economic geographer and consultant. They are the authors of a forthcoming Lowy Institute Paper on the Australian diaspora.