

Diaspora: The World Wide Web of Australians

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According to this year's estimate from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade there are approximately 870,000 Australians living overseas - a substantial increase from last year's estimate of 760,000.

Relatively speaking this group is well-educated, well-remunerated, well-connected and well-disposed to Australia. They are increasingly mobile, moving between Australia and other countries as career and life chances appear.

In the past couple of years the national conversation on this community of Australians has increased in volume - and not before time. For too long, discussion on the issue has been confined to hand-wringing about a supposed brain drain, and criticism of 'loudmouth expatriates' who have forfeited their right to comment on Australian affairs by taking a foreign postcode.

In November 2004, Chloë Flutter and I published a Lowy Institute Paper called *Diaspora: The World Wide Web of Australians*. Drawing on research by Bob Birrell, Graeme Hugo and others, we suggested it is time Australia took its expat community seriously, and factored them into discussions about national policy.

We commissioned opinion polling and were frankly surprised at how positive resident Australians are about their offshore cousins. 91% of respondents, for example, agreed that expats are 'adventurous people prepared to try their luck and have a go overseas'; by contrast only 10% believed that they 'have let us down by leaving Australia.' Australian goodwill was matched by expatriate affection. As Nikki Gemmill, the London-based Australian author, told us: 'We read Australian newspapers online, we watch Australian television shows, we seek out Australian films. We will always feel Australian, and we want our children to grow up with Australian accents.'

Our argument was that it makes good economic and policy sense for Australia to increase its efforts to reach out to the diaspora and enmesh them in our national endeavours. The economic consequences of emigration are mixed, but there are tangible benefits that can accrue to a home country from its diaspora. Some of these benefits are already flowing to Australia, but by working more closely with our emigrants we can seek to capture more of them. For a country which is small in population and physically isolated, it's the only logical approach.

After all, what's the alternative? The rise of the diaspora is largely the result of factors which are beyond our control. The globalisation of the labour market means that highly skilled Australians will go where opportunities lie. Short of erecting fences along our coastline to keep people in, or bribing them to return with large sums of taxpayers' money, influencing the development of the diaspora is mostly not within our power.

Our recommendations were modest and targeted: first, that our national leaders should articulate the value we place on our expats to draw them further into the mainstream of our national life - in the way that Irish and Indian and New Zealand leaders have done; secondly, the government needs to take a more coordinated approach to engaging with our expatriates - not by creating a large new bureaucracy but by recording existing best practices at Australian diplomatic posts and distributing them throughout the system; thirdly, the government should find ways to simplify and advertise the procedures for overseas enrolment and voting in order to increase the number of expats who vote, and establish a joint parliamentary standing committee on the diaspora; fourthly, businesses and non-profits should also exploit the opportunities offered by expatriates with leading international experience; and finally, the government should collect better information on the diaspora.

In March 2005 the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee tabled its report on its inquiry into Australian expatriates, *They Still Call Australia Home*. The Committee picked up some of the Lowy Institute's recommendations and made further useful suggestions, all of them designed to give expats a greater stake in the country, and to capitalise on their goodwill in the national interest.

The response from our leaders on both sides of politics to these reports has been positive. The response from the diaspora has been electric. A friend in the UK told me that newspapers stories on the Lowy report shot around Australian expat email lists faster than the ball flew along the Welsh back line against the Wallabies last month.

Now it is time to hear how this enthusiasm can be translated into government action. The diaspora is not a first-order economic issue - but it is an issue that deserves consideration by Australians. And while it is difficult to make policy for a population that lives outside your national borders, it is surely not beyond our wit.

The Lowy Institute Paper, *Diaspora: The World Wide Web of Australians*, is available at:
<http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=182>.
