

Expats - time to use them wisely

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In April, Italians will go to the polls to elect a new government. The voting will not only take place within Italy: millions of citizens living outside Italy, including in this country, will receive ballots next month. Unlike most instances of external voting, though, Italians abroad will elect 18 diaspora MPs, the *eletti all'estero*, whose job is to represent overseas Italians in the national parliament. They have real influence: in 2006, the vote of Senator Nino Randazzo from Melbourne helped toss the prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, out of office.

The Italian example is an illustration of an important but little-noted global trend: diasporas are getting larger, thicker and stronger. Expatriates have always felt memories of their past tugging at them, but in a globalised world that pull is getting stronger, and easier to satisfy. Homelands such as Australia, which for many years had ambivalent relationships with their expatriates, are seeing them in a different light: as well-placed contacts and unofficial ambassadors. Meanwhile, host countries are becoming increasingly aware of - and spooked by - the transnational communities in their midst. Since the September 11 attacks, a concern about 'fifth columns' has produced a flurry of new laws to identify suspect individuals, as well as policies to promote cultural integration.

What is driving this trend? The growth in international migration is part of the explanation. A reaction against global homogenised culture is another: certainly, we all read Harry Potter and shake our heads over Paris Hilton, but many people are searching for more 'authentic' identities in the folds of their memory or their ancestry. The conclusion of the Cold War reduced the global importance of ideology, increased the salience of nationalism and brought forward new rising powers boasting influential diasporas, such as China. The ability of diasporans to live and do business across borders has been enabled by changes of policy by national governments, such as the extension of dual citizenship rights.

Finally, technological developments are transporting people more easily and connecting them more securely with their homeland: for instance, British Pakistanis can fly direct from Manchester to Islamabad and Australians abroad can read the Herald each day online, before anyone back home has woken up. To some extent, these technologies are also narrowing people's vision, herding like-minded individuals and communities together.

The strengthening of global diasporas has significant economic, political and security implications. One example is the substantial growth in remittances sent home by workers abroad. According to the World Bank, total remittances to the developing world in 2006 were perhaps three times the size of the world's combined foreign aid budgets. There is growing evidence that remittances form an important piece of the development puzzle: they are well-targeted, largely immune from the governance problems associated with official aid, and more stable than private capital flows.

Diasporas can pose security threats, by hiding foreign intelligence operatives, ethnic criminal networks and long-distance nationalists - but they are also subject to security threats. A string of recent events with consular implications - including September 11, the bombings in Bali, Madrid and London, the Boxing Day tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the Israel-Hezbollah war - have driven up the global demand for the provision of consular assistance to nationals abroad, including emigrants.

Homeland governments are acting to meet this demand. Countries as different as Australia and the Philippines are providing increasingly robust consular assistance. China is an interesting case: last year, Beijing muscled up to Islamabad after militant attacks on Chinese citizens in Pakistan, which contributed to President Pervez Musharraf's decision to lay siege to the Red Mosque. In 2006 China leased foreign charter planes to airlift hundreds of

overseas Chinese out of troubled situations in Solomon Islands and Tonga, and organised evacuations from East Timor and Lebanon. This is a new development for China.

Diasporas deserve our attention, therefore, especially if current trends continue. What if homeland electoral authorities were to enfranchise diasporas - what if Irish-Americans were allowed to vote in elections in Northern Ireland? What if communal violence in Fiji caused a future Indian government to send some of its spanking new warships to the Pacific to protect Fijians of Indian origin? Could anti-immigrant feeling in the West cause governments to restrict immigration and choke off the remittance flows to which some countries are growing addicted?

On the positive side of the ledger, governments that devise effective ways of tapping their emigrant populations are likely to gain a significant advantage. They will make their countries larger - not only demographically but culturally, politically and economically. This does not require the election of diaspora MPs or the creation of diaspora ministries, two measures that are likely to induce a backlash on the part of resident nationals. Rather, it requires nimble and pragmatic outreach efforts.

With its large 'gold-collar' diaspora, the members of which are overwhelmingly well disposed to this country, Australia is well positioned to benefit from this global trend.

Michael Fullilove, the director of the global issues program at the Lowy Institute, is the author of *World Wide Webs: Diasporas And The International System*, released today.