

SUBMISSION 70

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters - Inquiry on Civics and Electoral Matters

02 June 2006

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am writing to make several suggestions about how the Australian Government can improve the method with which it reaches Expatriate Australians to keep them informed of their voting rights and to maximize their participation in Australian Federal and State elections.

By way of background, I have lived in China for more than 12 years where I work as a business consultant with an Australian firm, the Beijing Consulting Group Pty. Ltd., which helps Western companies establish businesses in China. I have previously worked for both Austrade and DIMIA in China, and am currently the Deputy-Chair of the Australian Chamber of Commerce in Beijing (AustCham Beijing), which is the main Australian community organization in Northern China and part of a network of AustChams across China (including Shanghai, South China, and Hong Kong) as well as across the region (Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, etc.). I am also an active Volunteer with the Southern Cross Group, the largest Australian expatriate group worldwide.

I am a frequent visitor to Australia where I spend approximately 2 months each year and where the bulk of my extended family resides. My wife and children are all Australian citizens although my wife is originally Chinese. My children attend school in both Australia and China and are bilingual. We follow Australian events extremely closely via satellite TV, radio and the Internet as well as through frequent visits and through regular phone calls to clients, friends and family in Australia.

I have voted in every Australian election for which I have been eligible since turning 18.

In terms of suggestions, I believe that the Australian Electoral Commission must be tasked with doing more to ensure that the approx. 1 million Australians (approx. 5% of the total population) who live outside of Australia's borders are better served by the Australian electoral system. To educate and ensure that these expat Australians have the opportunity to vote, significant changes must be made. In particular:

- 1) The AEC must seriously and proactively explore ways in which Australian expats can vote electronically. This would be far more efficient than the current "hard copy" process where expats either vote at an Australian Embassy or Consulate, or mail in a postal vote. The postal vote system is antiquated and ineffectual, and simply fails for many people. And Australia

does not have enough physical presences overseas to enable all expats to vote in person at an Australian government site, although this is the solution which I currently use to vote. When as expats we can conduct most aspects of our lives electronically (e.g. banking, communication, entertainment, accommodation, travel, shopping, tax, radio & newspapers, etc.) it seems totally anachronistic that we cannot also exert a simple and fundamental right, such as voting, electronically. The AEC must take bold steps to get with the times and to catch up with the e-readiness of many other Australian Government departments and agencies.

- 2) The AEC must also re-look at how it communicates with Australian Expats. The percentage of expats who vote is shockingly low. The AEC should actively seek to engage Australian expatriate organizations overseas and use these networks as cost-effective channels of communication. Such organizations should include: Australian Chambers of Commerce, the Southern Cross Group, sporting clubs, expatriate media, etc. The AEC would find that these organizations are ready and willing partners who could work with the AEC to achieve the mutual aim of keeping Aussie Expats well informed of their voting rights, and ensuring as many as possible are able to vote and not disenfranchised through poor information, or through physical distance and slow and ineffective delivery services.
- 3) Looking toward the future, I personally believe that Australia should be closely monitoring the feasibility of expatriate electorates. All Australians have a right to be represented in parliament and we should consider the creation in future of electorates which encompass expatriates who live offshore. The debate of this issue should commence sooner rather than later if Australia is to continue to lead the world in its handling of elections and enfranchisement of various sections of the Australian community. A logical step in this process would be for the AEC to have representation at some Australian Embassies in key strategic locations where they can reach major clusters of the Expatriate population (e.g. the UK, the US, HK/China, etc.).

I hope that the JSCEM Inquiry on Civics and Electoral Matters will give serious consideration to these suggestions.

Yours sincerely,

Edward Smith,