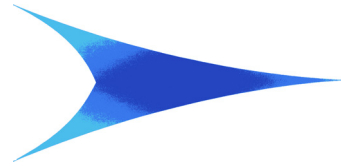


The Southern Cross Group

Promoting Mobility in the Global Community



Mr Peter Lindsay MP
Committee Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
C/o Committee Secretary
PO Box 6021
Department of House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

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18 May 2006

Dear Mr Lindsay,

Recommendation 13, Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee Report, March 2005 Inquiry into Australian Expatriates

You may be aware that the Southern Cross Group (SCG) is an international volunteer-run and volunteer-funded advocacy and support organisation for the Australian diaspora. Our work to date has included various efforts to achieve reforms to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* ("the Act") and to raise awareness within the global Australian community on existing legislative restrictions on enrolment for overseas Australians, so that greater numbers of Australian citizens resident outside Australia can have access to the electoral roll and thereby maintain their right to vote. You will recall that we participated in the JSCEM's Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2001 Election.

The matter of the franchise for Australian citizens abroad remains a key priority for the SCG. Our estimate is that in the order of half a million Australian citizens aged 18 or over who live overseas have lost their right to vote because while they remain abroad they are presently legally prevented from achieving enrolment.

Indeed, this matter was one of a number of diaspora issues which, following the conclusion of the JSCEM's Inquiry into the 2001 Election, received renewed attention during the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee Inquiry into Australian Expatriates in the period 2003 – 2005.

In its March 2005 Report at the conclusion of that Inquiry, in Recommendation 13 at paragraph 10.44 on page 127-8, the Senate Committee recommended that the Act should be amended as follows to assist expatriate Australians to maintain their electoral enrolment:

- Australian citizens moving or living overseas should be entitled to register as an "Eligible Overseas Elector" if they left Australia in the previous three years, or have returned to Australia (for any length of time) in the past three years; and they intend to resume residence in Australia within six years of their departure; and
- Australian citizens who have been living overseas for six years should be entitled to renew their enrolment as an eligible overseas elector if they have returned to Australia (for any length of time) within the last three years.

Recommendation 13 was supported by Government senators on the Senate Committee who expressed no reservations concerning it.

The Senate Committee in the Inquiry into Australian Expatriates also recommended that voting for overseas Australians should continue to be non-compulsory (Recommendation 14).

Over a year has passed since the Report was tabled in the Senate on 8 March 2005. On 5 May 2006 we wrote to the Attorney-General asking for an indication as to when we might see the Government's response to that Report.

In parallel, we would like to request that the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters specifically consider Recommendation 13 in the Senate Committee's March 2005 Report.

Does the JSCEM endorse that Recommendation?

The SCG was recently contacted by the JSCEM's Inquiry Secretary Dr Sonia Palmieri concerning the JSCEM's current inquiry into civics and electoral education. At Dr Palmieri's request, we have displayed information about the civics inquiry on our website and circulated an e-mail to the SCG's mailing list of 6,000 subscribers globally. The SCG hopes to make a submission as an organisation to that inquiry.

We are mindful, however, that the terms of reference of that inquiry are limited to civics and electoral education. For that reason our request for the JSCEM to specifically consider Recommendation 13 from the Senate Committee's March 2005 Report is made outside the context of that inquiry.

We look forward to your response.

Kind regards,

Anne MacGregor
Co-founder
Southern Cross Group