

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Department of House of Representatives
PO Box 6021 Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600 AUSTRALIA

Please accept the following submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiring into and reporting on "all aspects of the 2010 Federal Election and matters related thereto."

I am an Australian citizen based in New Delhi for the past two years, where I have been conducting fieldwork for my PhD on Australian identity in an expatriate community. In the last sixteen years, I have resided outside of Australia, non-continuously, for almost nine years. My permanent residence is in Australia.

The matters I raise for consideration relate to interests of the Australian diaspora or expatriates, that is, Australian citizens who *reside* abroad, irrespective of the duration of time spent overseas. This includes Australians residing outside of the country on a temporary or ongoing basis and is consistent with the definition used by the 2005 Senate Report, *They still call Australia home: Inquiry into Australian expatriates*.

The election in 2010 raised some important issues relating to the Australian diaspora as a political constituency. The two points I'd request be considered are:

- voter eligibility; and
- political representation.

These points are clearly related, however, I address them separately, within the broader context of the size and influence of the Australian diaspora.

Voter eligibility

The Australian diaspora is now estimated at one million people (Fullilove, 2008, p. 23), which is 4.6% of Australia's resident population. It is unprecedented in size and according to authoritative demographers and social commentators, likely to grow. Prominent Australians such as Allan Gyngell have accepted Australian expatriates as "the most important manifestations of globalisation" (Gyngell & Wesley, 2007, p. 154).

Demographic research shows that 75% of Australians who depart Australia return, irrespective of whether they intend to depart temporarily or permanently (Birrell et al., 2004, p. 50; Senate Report, 2005, p. 6).

One could therefore estimate about 750,000 Australians living abroad have an abiding interest and attachment to nation.

A proportion of these will, however, be minors and therefore not eligible to vote. While the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has some information regarding Australians in OECD countries, the proportion of adults to minors is not available. The ABS reports that 84% of Australians living in OECD countries are 15 years or over (ABS, 2006). On the basis of my current research, in a sample of 50 Australians residing in New Delhi in 2010 there were 33 accompanying children under the age of 18 - about 40%. While I do not claim this proportion is representative of the Australian diaspora as a whole, it is consistent with ABS figures for the OECD. On this basis, my ball-park estimate of voting-age Australians abroad, with an abiding interest in Australia, is 60% of 750,000 - about 450,000.

According to information I requested from the Australian Electoral Commission regarding the 2010 federal election, 74,084 postal votes were issued to Australian voters abroad. While this is a record high, reflecting Australian mobility in the age of globalisation, it appears to fall far short of adequately representing the one million Australians abroad. Even if my conservative estimate of 450,000 Australians is taken as a marker, one would expect a figure six times that. The Australian diaspora appears to be under-represented in the 2010 election.

This raises the issue of whether Australians abroad, despite their commitment to Australia, are impeded in their access to the democratic process. While my own experiences have been positive, many Australians living abroad are dissatisfied with the level and nature of their political representation in Australia.

I expect individual expats and diasporic pressure groups such as the Southern Cross Group and Advance Australia will contribute directly to this inquiry. A common grievance is a sense of being "disenfranchised." Various issues of concern include: being removed from the electoral roll for not voting although voting from abroad is not compulsory; the three year time frame for registration; and the six year time frame for residing outside of Australia. Many question whether these limits should apply generally, while acknowledging applications for exemption can be made in particular cases.

Political representation

While the figure of 74,084 votes issued overseas may not sufficiently represent the Australian diaspora as a constituency, it is nevertheless a very significant figure in terms of the 2010 federal election and likely to grow in future elections. It is therefore worth considering the potential impact of the diasporic vote on Australian politics and consulting on ways to best manage this.

The overseas vote is larger than the margin with which Rob Oakeshott, Member for Lyne (NSW), and Tony Windsor, Member for New England (NSW), won their seats - a total of 51,805. They are, of course, the two Independents who decided Australia's current government.

Furthermore, the number of votes issued abroad was greater than the size of seven federal divisions or electorates (Lingiari and Solomon in the Northern Territory; Franklin, Bass, Braddon, Denison and Lyons in Tasmania). In terms of sheer numbers, Australians voting from abroad in 2010 could constitute an electorate or division of the Lower House in their own right.

According to the available statistics from the 2010 election, the Australian diaspora did not determine the result in any given seat. Votes from the diaspora are currently counted in the specific electorates in which expatriate Australians are registered. This dilutes the expatriate vote across the country as a whole.

However, the diasporic vote ranges from 1,000 to over 2,000 in eighteen Lower House seats. It seems the Australian diaspora is already influential and could adopt strategies to assert more direct political power by targeting electorates that already have a high concentration of diasporic votes.

The emerging question appears to be whether the Australian political system creates a separate, dedicated representation for this group in Parliament, reflecting its voting strength, or risks the targeting of various seats.

Allan Gyngell and Michael Wesley have commented on the influential and at times definitive role the Australian diaspora has played in shaping domestic and foreign policy (Gyngell & Wesley, 2007, p. 154). While I am not advocating any particular model, one advantage of dedicated representation for this group in Parliament is rendering Australian expatriate interests more transparent and accountable.

It is worth considering the approaches of various countries regarding political representation of the diaspora. In 2001 the Tremaglia law was introduced in Italy and effectively established an overseas electorate comprising 12 members in the Chamber of Deputies and 6 senators (Fullilove, 2008, p. 74). Such a law can be contentious if the diasporic vote holds the balance of power. However, the financial contribution of the diaspora, particularly through remittances and taxation, is usually an effective counter.

India currently opts for an administrative approach. One of the four largest diasporas in the world, the Indian diaspora numbers 25 million and is larger than Australia's total population. It has a dedicated federal ministry, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (Fullilove, 2008, pp. 6, 19). Estimated at one million, the Australian diaspora is much smaller

than the Indian in real terms, but significantly larger as a proportion of its national population.

Given the number of Australians living and working abroad in the 21st century, and the dynamic that brings, it's time to consider options for more effective representation for this group of Australians. Perhaps it's worth keeping in mind current US President Obama was once an American child living in the diaspora. I wonder how many future Australian leaders are growing up there now, and what their understanding of democracy is and can be?

I thank you for considering this submission.

Yours sincerely,

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PhD Scholar

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