

From: Brad Saracik, Munich Germany
To: the Legal and Constitutional Committee of the Australian Senate
Subject: Inquiry into Australian Expatriates

Since I first heard about this inquiry, I've come to realise that our Diaspora should be as much a part of Australia as the water in the Sydney Harbour. On almost every point I've considered, my instincts tell me that our overseas citizens are a positive resource, that they could be better leveraged and their interests better served. Australians overseas should be assisted to recognise and profit from their status as Australian ambassadors and advertisements. In turn they will be far more capable of helping Australia from afar. Impediments to leaving from and returning to Australia should be reduced as much as possible: the information and opportunity that flows is a valuable, uniquely Australian resource. In the modern networked world, Australia should be accessible to all Australians, regardless of where they are. Information relevant to overseas Australians should be more easily accessible and regulations made simpler and more transparent. There should be more awareness and perhaps understanding within Australia and Australian government for the many people with different circumstances as a result of being or having been overseas. Where possible, bilateral agreements and treaties should be sought which provide overseas Australians with the best deal possible and above all flexibility of movement. Australians overseas should be a resource that all Australians can use to obtain access to overseas cultures, markets and opportunities.

(a) Diaspora Extent: large, useful, largely unexplored and unexploited

I don't know how big our Diaspora is, but I can say that Australians are everywhere. I'm now surprised when I go somewhere and don't bump into resident and travelling Australians. Well-travelled people know we come from a lucky, far-away country.

Australia often regards itself as a small influence on the world stage, yet in sport, travel and film and frequently in business as international employees, Australians enjoy a reputation as world best. Our Diaspora does much to build on this reputation and it is in our national interest to exploit and improve it. Since only 5% of Australians are overseas, the more the world likes what it sees, the more it will want to work and share with the remaining 95%. However, they need regular reminding that its there. Australians abroad should be encouraged and assisted to act as advertisers and ambassadors and help connect the people, governments and businesses they come into contact with to Australia.

How many overseas cities (e.g. London, New York), have such a large Australian contingent that if you dropped them somewhere in rural Australia, it would be a significant town? Unfortunately many Australian individuals, politicians and businesses don't know about or consider these concentrations thousands of kilometers away. Most first-timers are completely surprised by how large and prevalent the Australian influence already is in many of the places we most want to visit or do business with. Not only are Australian citizens being forgotten, ignored or under-represented, an important resource is being underutilised.

Measuring the extent of the Diaspora is one thing, however, getting the geographically separated groups in closer contact with each other seems more important.

(b) Factors for Moving Overseas

In my case I went overseas at 22 with two university degrees, originally as a backpacker not knowing for how long exactly, but expecting at least a year or two and come what may. I only considered the significance of a longer-term stay and professional career outside of Australia when a serious offer was made. It's now been six years.

In our under thirties, desire to travel is a significant factor. Once bitten by the travel bug, it is also a deterrent to return: saved \$US, Pounds or Euro incomes tend to have a higher spending power than \$AUD incomes. Lower incomes, less vacation and increased distances make it more difficult for young people in Australia to explore much of the world (Bavaria has 6 weeks paid vacation). I now find it difficult to envisage continuing back home without this lifestyle aspect. If one was forced to choose one lifestyle, Australia is hard to beat, but the affordable variety that Europe provides cannot be rivalled by isolated cities like Perth or Sydney. As an example, I went snowboarding on a Thursday in January and Saturday flew to the Canary Islands and the beach. This cost less than a Perth-Sydney flight.

Some young university and business high achievers leave as part of looking for something new or world best, that they can't get in Australia. Some don't return for the same reason. Another factor I've observed was overseas origins or family, sometimes with the possibility of obtaining a useful (e.g. EU) passport.

These factors, while relevant to this enquiry and something to understand, are not things we can change. In my opinion, we will gain more by recognising that many different Australians will want to live overseas while retaining their Australian identity and encourage these citizens to continue to contribute to Australia's wellbeing.

(c) Costs, Benefits and Opportunities

I have made references throughout this submission to benefits and opportunities as they arose. The only cost I clearly see in the Diaspora phenomenon is not utilising and serving it properly. A cost due to loss of income or talent (brain-drain) would only be meaningful if you could prove that a corresponding position in the Australian economy was left unfilled or an opportunity for growth was missed due to the departing Australian. Many benefits are also intangibles: for example recognition gained while working overseas with an Australian profile. The committee and other interested parties should seek ways to take real advantage of these intangibles.

I was interested to read that statistics show that Australia is not experiencing a brain drain. With few facts at my disposal, I have come to the conclusion this is a potentially misleading way of considering the flow of Australian talent. Australian universities and companies turn out a proportionally high number of extremely talented, energetic and solution focused individuals. However, Australia's relatively small population and isolation limits the potential 'think big' opportunities one can offer within its borders. Trained to think globally, independent, interested in travel and headhunted from overseas, there will be a disproportionately large Australian elite in the Diaspora. Some will be the cream of the crop taking opportunities which don't exist or are rare in Australia. Many of the curious, travelling Australians who can afford long term travel will be well educated and highly employable. My experience meeting equivalent professionals in

Europe is that they will not consider emigrating to Australia due to its isolation, fewer opportunities and/or less flexibility and reduced salaries. The benefits an Australian lifestyle offers are recognised, but pull more weight with less achievement- or opportunity-oriented Europeans. I imagine the situation in America or Canada is similar and the brain drain statistics contain a significant regional and cultural element. For talented individuals coming from less developed or unstable regions Australia represents a haven of opportunity. I expect a comparison between Australia, Japan, the EU, USA and Canada would result in a significant brain drain or talent loss for Australia. To define this as a cost, however, seeks to deny us these overseas opportunities and implies that compatible opportunities in Australia are there for the taking. Regardless of the exact demographics, it is important that Australians overseas are harnessed to use their talent for Australia's good and not hindered from their best choices or discriminated against for taking them. They should also be kept in the loop and encouraged to seek out opportunities to return, bringing their foreign incomes, contacts and expertise back to Australia.

(d) Needs and Concerns

I have rarely accessed Australian services abroad. This does not mean I did not need them or could not have used them. On the contrary. Munich, my city of residence, has no Australian representation and on a few occasions I have not found the correct source for information or help.

In many instances I have wondered why Australians are treated at a disadvantage in comparison with citizens of the USA, Canada, New Zealand and even South Africa. I heartily encourage the committee to examine any and all possibilities of expanding Australia's treaty arrangement and bilateral agreements so that our citizens receive a better deal overseas.

The following examples provide a sample from my own experience.

As a backpacker in 1998 I had a passport stolen from a hostel in Brussels. Luckily we have an embassy there and I managed to receive a replacement passport within a day. In an interesting stalemate, which repeated itself in other dealings with overseas bureaucracies, the Embassy wanted a police report before proceeding, while the police wanted verification from the Embassy. As often happens, by the time I got to the people with more responsibility, they were disappointed with the unnecessary delay and intransigence caused by the initial point of contact. I remember thinking in Brussels that the front desk should be manned by an Australian, as the Belgian who was working there was not a good advertisement for Australia. To this day I do not know if I would have required a replacement visa for France (they no longer needed a Schengen visa by the time I got there) or a working-holiday visa for the UK. Interestingly as I passed through the UK as a tourist I mentioned the visa missing from my passport and although it was four or five months after I'd first entered England on that visa, their computer had no record of it. I mention this as an example of situations faced by Australians abroad where they are normally on their own, often facing confusing officials from other governments and no idea what the rules are.

Having accepted a job offer in Munich Germany, I again had no idea as to the process required for an entry visa, working permit and residence permit. Not speaking German and trying to do it all myself did not help. I do vaguely recall talking to or eMailing an Australian at the embassy in Bonn and receiving some help, but no English speakers seemed to know or understand the

process for an Australian already in Germany. The standard way for an Australian to obtain a visa is to apply from Canberra, although you are expected to include where you are going to live and work. There is no appreciation for the distance or difficulty involved (e.g. not having a passport while they process the application). I also had to demonstrate that there were no German or EU citizens available in this line of work. In comparison, US Citizens could obtain everything in Germany and receive an unrestricted work permit (ours are usually linked to a specific employer). There is now more information in English available, but the process has not changed. Once I was able to speak German, I did not have a problem renewing my permits, except for the hassle of work-permit restrictions and the regular renewals. If I had the possibility of obtaining an EU passport to avoid many of these restrictions, I would jump at it.

That Australians require tourist visas for countries like Czech Republic, Hungary and Portugal, is simply puzzling (Portugal may no longer be the case: since my German Visa lets me in, I haven't checked). Canadians and New Zealanders do not. I have always assumed this is based on reciprocal agreements of some kind. I cannot see the benefit in this for Australia.

To obtain a German driver's licence, an Australian is required to pass a driver's examination, hand-in their Australian driver's license and pay exorbitantly for the privilege. Left-hand-drive South Africans are able to swap their licenses without the exam and large costs. In circumstances like this, that make absolutely no sense, it is rarely clear how to raise the problem with the relevant Australian body. It is another case of 'The Rules'. While on the subject of driver's license, I have no idea what would happen if I stopped renewing my Western Australian license and in the future attempted to obtain an Australian driver's license. Although I have been unable to drive in Germany on that license for years, I still renew it.

Australian citizens abroad do not necessarily have easy/cheap access to experts on Australian regulations concerning issues such as voting, taxation, pensions, superannuation and drivers' licenses. Information should be made readily accessible and processes more consistent and transparent. Areas of government define what it means to be a resident differently. As an example, voting, an important Australian responsibility is treated differently for State and Federal elections. I was automatically removed from the Western Australian electoral role, but for a federal election I postal vote as if living at the same geographical residence. Ideally, I would be able to vote and be included in a Census via the Internet.

There are many instances of unresolved questions or subjects which I have decided are simply better to ignore. I could manage my taxes, health insurance, pensions and superannuation better. Germany has an enormous and cumbersome welfare system. Much of it is compulsory. Australia recently signed an agreement managing pensions and this was one example where I had no problems obtaining the relevant information (in English and in German). The German official I spoke with said that the Australian brochure was the first bilingual one she had seen. I now intend to leave Germany and obtain my contributions (roughly six months income) paid back in two years time. In Germany this will be tax free (my income was already taxed), but I have been unable to find out how Australia would treat this payment. My very small superannuation in Australia is actually losing money, but I was unable to have it paid out. I had paid and suspended Australian private health insurance, but have no idea of its status after six years.

Within Australia, we are extremely strong in support of non-English speakers. Unfortunately most overseas countries are not in the same league. Even in EU Germany, where most of the general population is quite capable, official support in English is often completely lacking. Expensive official translations of documents are usually compulsory. Perhaps it is possible to enable the multilingual facilities in Australia to also provide certain services for Australian's overseas?

(e) Measures in Other Countries

In Germany I have not seen mention of a Diaspora. Many famous Germans are overseas residents and this has occasionally made the news, mainly in regards to avoidance - either avoiding tax (Boris Becker) or the hype of being famous (M. Schumacher). I am not very informed, but from my perspective, Germany seems highly focused on those living there. I am sure those Germans retired in Spain or Italy would have more to say about the bureaucracy.

A German view of nationality is quite different. In conversational terms, you count as Bavarian if you were born in Bavaria and your parents were Bavarian. Becoming a German citizen is a long and difficult process and many citizens, including third generation immigrants don't identify themselves as German. When told I was born in South Africa, a usual response is something like "oh, you are South African". The inclusive, patriotic Australian concept (as I know it: immigrate, settle down, love the country, obtain citizenship and belong) is far more valuable to the interests of the nation. In addition to preserving the strong identification of our citizens who live outside our borders we should also advertise the strong sense of identification that Australia offers and the possibility of immigrating to it. Unfortunately I'm hearing more and more the opinion that it has become almost impossible to be accepted into Australia and the lucky ones suffer a time consuming and expensive process.

The Jewish Diaspora has a 2000 year old saying "next year in Jerusalem". As a contrast, my friends and I tend to say things like 'see you next time in A, B or who-knows-where'. Moving around, both to live and travel, seems more accepted by Australians than Europeans with similar capabilities. German employees avoid having periods of unemployment in their resumés: travel or temporarily living overseas is seen as a liability to getting hired.

(f) Improved Use of Expats to Promote Economic, Social and Cultural Interests

I think many expats already provide promotion for Australia, largely in an informal setting. My European friends now appreciate what Australian wine has to offer and know that it is well priced and available. I regularly pass out tourism magazines and brochures that I have brought back from Australia as well as my own personal recommendations. Surprisingly many Europeans have learnt to play didgeridoo, but I always disappoint prospective audiences with my inability to play. On the other hand, none knew or understood anything about the style and meaning of aboriginal art. Having worked in the automotive sector for the first time overseas (for Japanese and German clients), I was unable to provide information or contacts in Australia. Numerous student acquaintances have requested contacts for work or work-experience in Australia, but none came to fruition. Australians are famous at the Oktoberfest, play cricket, football and rugby in Munich and have numerous clubs and meetings. I am not active in this community, but believe there is no organisation with the main aim of promoting Australian-German interests in Munich. Such organisations should be encouraged and receive support, I would assume filtered through larger networks and organisations. I would now be far more likely to take part and contribute to such activities than when I first arrived here.

I'd like to conclude by thanking all those responsible for instigating and following through with this inquiry. I hope my thoughts contribute in a useful way, I certainly appreciated the opportunity to consider these issues and order some of my thoughts relevant to Australia's treatment and use of its expatriates.