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February 26, 2004

The Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Sir/Madam,

Submission to the Inquiry into Australian Expatriates

I was born in Hobart, Australia on 24 September 1975. I grew up in Hobart and received my high school education there, moving to Canberra to pursue a Bachelors degree in Science at the Australian National University (ANU) in 1994. I completed my Bachelors degree with Honours in 1997, and received a University Medal. In 1998 I left for the United States to pursue a PhD in chemistry at the University of Chicago.

There were several reasons for my decision to leave Australia. I had a desire to travel and live overseas, and study abroad represented an excellent opportunity to do so. Also, I believed (and still believe) that it is critical for young scientists to work with and learn from a diverse group of mentors, and work on a range of problems, so as to gain a broad perspective of science and the ways it is practiced. Ambition also drove me to seek out the United States as one of the global centers of research, and I noted that two of my mentors at the ANU had themselves either come from or spent a significant time working overseas.

However, a particularly acute reason in 1997 was the decision of the Australian Government to make broad and significant cuts in the higher education sector. At the same time that the United States announced a tripling of the budget for the National Institute of Health, the Australian Government was cutting higher education funding by approximately 20% in real terms over three years. I was aware of several senior scientists who were leaving for positions overseas, and the career outlook for young scientists in Australia appeared rather bleak in comparison.

Now that I have been in the US for six years, and am finishing my PhD, I am very glad for my decision to leave, because I had an opportunity to study and learn all manner of things that I might otherwise have ignored. At the time I

left I envisaged that I may return to Australia for my postdoctoral fellowship or, later, to accept an lecturing position. I have maintained my professional links with Australi through membership of the Royal Australian Chemical Institute (RACI), and took some interest in the development of science and higher education policy since I have been away.

I remain unconvinced however, of a significant change in Australia's overall commitment to basic research, and at the same time I have become more aware of the opportunities abroad. I now intend to pursue a postdoctoral fellowship, and in all probability a professorship, in the US. I think it is inevitable that, with the increasing amount of time one spends abroad, the development of personal and professional ties increasingly preclude return to Australia.

However, I continue to hold strongly to my Australian identity. My accent is apparently undiminished, I have returned home annually for Christmas, and follow the news in Australia and even listen to the JJJ radio station on the internet occasionally. As I have said I maintain a professional connection to Australia through membership of the RACI, and I have recently begun a new collaboration with my previous mentors at the ANU. I have also voted in local, state and national elections either by postal ballot sent to me by my family, or by visiting the polling booths set up at the Australian Consulate in Chicago.

How might the Australian Government assist me as an expatriate, and in return receive benefit from me for the years it has invested in my well-being and education? Foremost, I would consider the right of dual citizenship. I confess I am unaware as to whether I am currently allowed dual citizenship, but I think it is certainly a good idea. Although it would be a long while before I would become an American citizen, were I to stay here I would appreciate the right to vote in US elections. However, it is in certain cases beneficial to be able to travel on a non-American passport. For instance, Brazil has recently made permanent rules that US citizens be photographed and fingerprinted, in retaliation to the US' new stipulations for visa holders.

Second, the right to vote is tied to citizenship. The potential for dual citizenship notwithstanding I shall for the foreseeable future be an Australian citizen. Despite living abroad, I treasure my right to vote, perhaps even more than I did when I lived in Australia because it is one of the few tangible ways I, as an expatriate, may participate in the future of my country. I also have opinions on several issues of policy, such as those related to science and higher education, which I feel are just as informed if not more so than many citizens living within Australia. I believe that in many cases, such as the recent referendum on the issue of an Australian Republic, expatriate opinions are every bit as important as those of citizens living within Australia.

I am fortunate that in Chicago I may visit polling booths at the Australian Consulate, but this will not hold true for future places I may work in. Also, for several local elections I have missed the opportunity to vote even though my family registered me for absentee ballots, because of the time required to mail

the materials to me and return them. Though I may again display ignorance of the current laws, I think it would be great if Australian missions, embassies and consulates were able to hold lists of registered expatriate voters, so that the action of voting could be reduced to local mailing within the country of residence rather than mailing from overseas.

Another issue that the Inquiry may wish to consider is tax treaties. My student scholarship in America is taxable, and I have noticed that many students from other countries took advantage of treaties between their countries and the US to reduce their tax burden. Perhaps a tax treaty would allow Australian's working or studying overseas to pay less tax, or to make tax-deductible contributions to their superannuation in Australia.

Also, to the best of my knowledge there is no health treaty between Australia and the US. I am paying over a thousand USD per year for the equivalent of what Medicare would provide. I have also had several friends visit and require emergency attention, only to find that their travel insurance did not cover this or that accident. Perhaps the Australian government should consider engaging in a health treaty with the US that would assist expatriate Australians in accessing, perhaps in return for contributing to, Australia's health system.

An important feature through which expatriate Australians maintain their links with Australia is through professional associations. This is also a huge potential resource through which Australia may benefit from the experience and expertise expatriates have to offer. For instance, the only way I have received word of this inquiry is via the Southern Cross Group, of whom a friend of mine is a member.

I am very glad I maintained my membership of the RACI, but it has not been easy to do. Since the institute dues must be paid in Australian dollars my parents have generally paid the annual dues to be later reimbursed by me. Also, due to the cost of overseas mailing I generally receive the issues of the RACI magazine a month or more late, and there is often a gap of several months around the time I renew my membership. The Australian government may be able to help if, through its missions, embassies or consulates, Australian professional associations could collect membership dues from expatriates in the currency of their country of residence, and possibly receive mail this way as well.

In closing, I would like to emphasise one thing that is important to maximize the benefits for expatriate Australians and Australia at large to benefit rather than suffer from the 'Australian diaspora', communication. It seems currently that it is the responsibility of the individual living overseas to maintain their links by accessing news and information, and researching what government rules and opportunities exist for exploiting their citizenship while overseas. Perhaps my opinions expressed above reflect my own ignorance of existing opportunities, if so there has certainly been little effort on the part of the Australian government to enlighten me. Most specifically, in the case of science funding, I would be completely ignorant of the recent Federation fellowship program were it not for

my own interest in the RACI and reading Australian news sites.

In the age of instant communication via the web, but not neglecting the value of Australias missions overseas as points of personal contact and the advantage of local currencies and mailing, I am sure the Inquiry can think of innovative ways to assemble information of relevance to expatriates, as well as lists of those expatriates interested in maintaining links with Australia, so that the 'diaspora' may be an asset, not a loss, to the nation I still call home.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Baxter