

Athens,
Greece

25 February 2004

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

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Submission to Australian Expatriates Inquiry

I am writing in response to in response to the invitation for public comment as part of the Committee's Inquiry into Australian Expatriates.

My family and I (husband and 2 children aged 5.5 and 2.5) left Australia in February 2001 and have lived in Spain for 11 months and Greece for the remainder since that time.

Our reason for leaving was primarily a career (promotional) opportunity for my husband to pursue his "Olympic Dream" and continue employment in an Olympic related role, after he spent 2.5 years working for the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games.

To say we have experienced the highs and lows of living abroad is an understatement.

Anticipating culture shock, the best preparation I could make in advance was to try to find information on general living conditions and customs, schools, social and women's clubs and medical/legal personnel. Before departure for Spain and whilst in Spain, I sought information from both Australian Embassy websites for Spain and Greece.

Because I speak very limited Spanish and no Greek, I found the lack of information on local networks contributed to strong initial feelings of isolation. Sadly, I found more and better information elsewhere, including some on British and American Embassy websites.

I would recommend the Committee consider a number of recommendations to overcome the lack of information provided by Australian Embassies to assist Australian citizens assimilate more easily into other countries, especially those where English is not the native language:

- That more resources be allocated to Australian Embassies and large consulates to allow for additional Community Liaison Officers (even if part-time or volunteer) to be appointed. In the event that this cannot be achieved, that discussions be undertaken with the American and British Governments to determine whether local American and British Embassies could provide this service for Australian citizens.
- That all Australian Embassy websites particularly for non-English countries be expanded to provide more comprehensive information on the practicalities of living in these foreign countries. Websites could be expanded to include links to websites for all local English speaking kindergartens, schools, universities; international social clubs, international women's clubs (eg the Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas <http://www.fawco.org>); international churches, other reliable websites (for example one for

United States diplomats that offers real life updates on living in various countries (<http://www.talesmag.com/index.shtml>), relocation websites offering information on local customs and living conditions, translation websites and online English-language weather reports, currency calculation and online English-language street Directories (eg <http://www.maporama.com>).

Given the Australian volunteer ethos, I strongly encourage the Committee to consider the potential of using locally based Australian volunteers to work with local Embassies and consulates to assist newcomers assimilate into foreign countries.

Another area where I feel more could be done to assist Australians living abroad is in the area of Australian identity. I refer specifically to the opportunity presented by the correspondence education system to offer Australian children living abroad the opportunity to learn about their Australian heritage. Currently, each state education system oversees its own correspondence schools with each state having different curriculum and enrolment procedures.

From what I understand, Victoria for example offers the opportunity for kindergarten-aged children to enrol just in English if they are enrolled overseas in a school where English is not the native language. This opportunity is not available in all other states, including NSW.

My son currently attends an English-language kindergarten in Greece but I would dearly love for him to learn more about his Australian identity in one subject without the requirement for a complete school enrolment. I would also like the opportunity for him to learn other languages via the correspondence system, even if this was available via a full fee for service.

Another problem for expatriates is that correspondence schools have a limited enrolment period (for example 2 years) and after that, continuing enrolment is not guaranteed. Many Australian expatriate families are out of the country for much longer than that and more importantly, children with dual citizenship could permanently reside out of the country and therefore miss out on a valuable opportunity to learn about their Australian heritage in a formal setting.

I offer the following recommendations for the Committee's consideration:

- That the Federal Government facilitates the development of a single curriculum in Australian citizenship/heritage/identity for use by correspondence schools for all school aged children (kindergarten, primary, and secondary).
- That the Federal Government enter into discussions with the State Governments to facilitate the standardising, simplifying and easing of enrolment procedures to allow Australia children living abroad to undertake one or a number of subjects depending on parents' choice in local schooling.

A third area for the Committee's consideration is the area of doing business with government agencies and businesses. We find it difficult sometimes to access people to speak to, when companies, in particular only list toll free numbers on websites and correspondence. These numbers do not always work when you are calling from overseas. We also have no option sometimes but to wait on hold for long periods of time to speak to various people in government agencies and businesses. A dedicated number landline number eg (02)..... for Australians calling from overseas that is advertised on websites and documents would assist greatly.

We also find it difficult to track changes in government legislation affecting us and rely on a non-government group called the Southern Cross Group to relay information to us via its regular emails. Better and more specific information on our taxation responsibilities, including information on capital gains tax and personal income tax would be helpful. An example of a question we are currently working through with our accountant is “how long after returning to Australia do we have to live in our principal place of residence after being out of the country for 6 years before we can leave again before we incur capital gains tax”?

We find the requirements of various Government agencies onerous on occasions as well, particularly when we need to have various documents witnessed. Finding another Australian citizen to witness an application to enrol to vote is not always that simple. Including in new legislation and policy an impact statement on Australians living abroad would assist to ensure these citizens are not disadvantaged in any way.

I request the Committee consider the following recommendations:

- That the Federal Government facilitates the development of a “Doing Business with Australians Living Abroad Guide” for Australian companies and government agencies.
- That the Federal Government consider including an impact statement on Australians living abroad in developing any new legislation and policy.
- That the Federal Government consider making ongoing operational funding available to non-government support groups like the Southern Cross Group.
- That the Federal Government consider the establishment of an “Australians Living Abroad Taxation Reference Group” to advise the Australian Taxation Office on issues of concern.

A fourth area where we have found difficulties is getting work permits and residence visas processed. My husband’s residence permit for Spain was issued after we left the country after spending 11 months there. Whilst we appreciate the resource intensiveness of this process, we would appreciate each Australian Embassy preparing and making available a comprehensive list of local immigration lawyers and a translation of country specific requirements into English.

It would also be helpful if discussions could be undertaken with the European Union to ensure that if an Australian citizen obtains work and residence permits for one EU country, then these could be used to allow a transfer to another country or at least to fastrack an application in a second EU country. The difficulties for international companies obtaining visas and work permit for Australian citizens means it is often easier for such companies to employ someone other than an Australian.

The following recommendations are offered:

- That the Federal Government directs Embassies and Consulates to provide a list of immigration lawyers for use by Australians living in foreign countries.
- That the Federal Government enters into discussions with the EU to simplify, streamline and standardise requirements for Australian citizens to obtain residence and work permits in EU countries.

My final comment is on our contribution as Australians living abroad. Our role is largely to act as goodwill ambassadors for the country. I also am fortunate to be able to be able to do voluntary work for a small rural non-profit community organisation in Buderim, Queensland via email, phone and the internet. This has helped me feel like I still belong and am connected to an Australian community. Our lifestyle in Europe is one where it is difficult to feel connected to the local community due the language barrier. Opportunities for Australians to find volunteer positions in Australia could be enhanced.

I recommend the Committee consider the following recommendation:

- That the Federal Government examine the potential of Australians living abroad to undertake voluntary service for Australian community organisations and that resources be allocated to developing an Australian internet volunteer matching service like United States and British services (<http://www.volunteermatch.org/> and http://www.timebank.org.uk/givetime/overseas_directory.htm).

Thank you for the opportunity of contributing and I look forward to the reading the Committee's final report.

Yours sincerely

Leanne Evans