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The Secretariat
Legal and Constitutional References Committee
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RE: Senate Enquiry into Australian Expatriates

Thank you for the opportunity to present our views on the issues associated with Australian expatriates and repatriates.

As we have done in the past, Newcomers Network is keen to continue to assist all newcomers to make the most of their new life in their new location regardless of where they have come from or how long they plan to stay.

We would also like to continue working with all levels of government and enterprise to constantly improve processes and opportunities.

I am happy to discuss our comments in person or via email.

Yours sincerely

Sue Vitnell BBus AIMM
Founder
Newcomers Network

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Executive summary

Newcomers Network is well placed to comment on the issues of Australian Expatriates and Repatriates as we work with these people every day.

To address the issues, we would encourage a:

- Focus on connections as 'English speakers' often miss the opportunity to find the resources they need
- Whole of government approach with the best models from Australia and overseas
- Implementation of self management tools, processes and checklists
- Greater use of enewsletters, online networks, registering of Australians overseas and affiliates in Australia
- Techniques that can be managed online but also provide personal support through social and facilitated networking
- Greater general community awareness and involvement in the issues through media, awards and more effective utilization of existing resources
- More research collaboration between business, government and universities
- Better use of alumni associations, professional associations (offer a special international membership rate) and indigenous and multicultural networks

Newcomers Network welcomes the opportunity to comment on these issues in further detail.

1. Newcomers Network profile

Newcomers Network is an online guide for people who have moved. We are based in Melbourne, Australia.

In February 1994, Sue Vitnell moved from Adelaide to Melbourne as a result of her husband's new work role. Personal and work circumstances made it difficult for her to find and keep new friends and thanks to a suggestion from a business colleague, in September 1999, Sue Vitnell began both academic and personal research into the social, cultural and informational needs of newcomers. 96 people who had moved to Melbourne within the last five years were surveyed and many more newcomers and industry professionals were personally interviewed. Results at <http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/yoursay/surveys/pastsurveys/movingtomelbourne.php>



Launch at Victorian Arts Centre 2001

As a result of this comprehensive research, in May 2001, Newcomers Network was officially launched at the Victorian Arts Centre.

Some of our achievements since then include:

1.1 Website expansion

Building up the website to over 6000 unique visits per month. In the last six months, the website traffic has been increasing at an average of more than 21% per month. For several search strings, a link on our website appears on page one, link one on the Google search engine results page (for instance, when you type in 'finding a job in Australia' or 'deciding to move,' our link appears first).

<http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/oursay/websitestatistics/index.php>

1.2 Enewsletter

Producing and distributing a free monthly enewsletter that is read by over 5,000 people worldwide each month. Although an exact percentage cannot be determined (because we do not request personal information), based on 'educated guesses,' the ratio of males and females subscribing to the enewsletter is 50/50. Subscribers are based in Victoria, Australia and overseas and most of the people utilize a personal email address rather than a 'work' email address. The enewsletter is often passed on to the subscriber's network (for instance Relocation Industry people will forward it on)

<http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/oursay/newsletters/index.php>

1.3 Online forums

We participate in a wide range of online forums. For example we are part of specific groups for specific countries (like South Africa, USA, UK) but also part of online networks (like ryze and ecademy) where we answer more general queries

<http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/oursay/reciprocallinks/index.php>

1.4 Events

Running 23 affordable events with over 1000 guests (newcomers and networkers) including a collaborative event with Manningham City Council and the three International Women's Forum series at the Melbourne Town Hall. Our regular newcomer referral sessions and 'meet the author' networking lunches are hosted in Melbourne and feature Australian authors of books related to being a newcomer. Details of past events can be found at <http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/events/past.php>

1.5 Brochure

Printing a sponsored 'fridge magnet' DL size full colour card information brochure available through the Melbourne Visitor Information Centre at Federation Square, Australian Trade Centre, various Relocation/Destination Service Providers, Universities and Real Estate Agents <http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/forms/dlorder.php>

1.6 Research

We are constantly completing research via our monthly online poll and we help promote current research projects and findings via our enewsletter and links on the Newcomers Network website. We also help people conducting research into expatriate and repatriate issues from around the world.

We plan to begin a worldwide online moving survey (focusing on the issues of settlement for people who speak English) in May 2004

<http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/information/research/index.php>

1.7 Awards

In 2001, Newcomers Network won a Highly Commended Award in the Emerging Business Category of the Micro Business Network Awards. In 2002 we entered the inaugural Premier's Business Sustainability Awards and in 2003, Sue Vitnell was nominated for the Telstra Businesswoman of the Year Awards.

1.8 Federal Government Relationship

In May 2003, we were approached by the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) to promote Australian Citizenship <http://www.citizenship.gov.au> to English speaking migrants. We have continued and developed this relationship to include promotion of Australian Citizenship Day, Living in Harmony <http://www.immi.gov.au/harmony> and Harmony Day through our enewsletter, website and direct emails but also via substantial coverage in various local and online media.



Australian Citizens

We are not a member of a political party and we are keen to do whatever will help newcomers make the most of their new life in their new location, so the concept of Australian Citizenship fits perfectly with our motto of 'new location, new life, make the most of it!'

In November 2003, after organizing a small focus group, we provided over 30 detailed suggestions and strategies for improvements to the DIMIA 'Victorian Settlement Information Kit' directly to the Victorian Office of DIMIA. <http://www.immi.gov.au/settle>

1.9 State Government Relationship

We have had a long standing relationship with the Skilled Migration Unit, the Business Migration Unit and the Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development. We have recently contacted the Provincial Victoria campaign and the Rural Women's Network.

1.10 Local Government Relationship

In August 2003 we were approached by the City of Melbourne to be listed on their new <http://www.businessmelbourne.com.au> website and we have been actively involved with this group since then. Our link is listed in the 'Liveability' section at <http://www.businessmelbourne.com.au/index.cfm?c=10&p=521&k=551> We have also been supported in various other ways by the City of Melbourne (event promotion, brochure display, guest speakers, information etc) and the City of Manningham (joint event, ongoing dialogue, information etc)

1.11 Testimonials

We receive personal testimonials and letters of thanks every day (copies are available). Details of additional press coverage and radio interviews can be provided on request. We have also supported various government, non government and private initiatives related to being a newcomer, helped media representatives find information or candidates to interview, been a guest on ABC radio and worked collaboratively with professional organizations (in particular the Recruitment and Consulting Services Association and the American Women's Auxiliary)

<http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/yoursay/testimonials/index.php>

1.12 Promotion

We have not paid for any advertising....our rapid growth has been achieved through a variety of networking and word of mouth techniques

1.13 Current funding

There is no cost or registration process to access our website or have email questions answered. Information is provided from government, non government and private sources – whatever is of benefit to newcomers.

At present, our operation is funded by many hours of voluntary work, event sponsorship, event ticket sales, website/newsletter/brochure advertising, corporate membership <http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/information/membership/index.php>, consulting services and private financial support (from Wayne and Sue Vitnell). We plan to open an online shop selling ebooks and other books related to being a newcomer and once the technology has been completed, we can generate further revenue on a 'per click' basis. We assumed that it would take three years to become fully self sustainable (May 2004).



Melbourne Airport Departures

1.14 Enquiry promotion

We have also promoted this Australian Expatriate Senate Enquiry throughout our various networks via individual emails to selected contacts and in our newsletter.

<http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/oursay/newsletters/0312.php>

1.15 Expansion of Newcomers Network

We are working with various regional Victorian centres and interstate and overseas locations to pave the way for a national roll out of Newcomers Network in 2004-2005 and an international expansion in 2005-2006. We also plan to work with the Good Beginnings <http://www.goodbeginnings.net.au> team to develop a community based personal mentor/support program for newcomers. We helped set up the Melbourne International Social Group and provide ongoing direct support. We also publish many other 'newcomer group' pages on our website and support their efforts whenever we can.



Australian beach

1.16 Newcomers Network does not address

The issues of visas, migration, travel and moving arrangements, customs etc – just the settlement process, mostly after people have moved.

2.0 Context of the Enquiry

Why is this Senate Enquiry important in our view? There is no doubt that your own statistics and research would confirm these issues.

But from our perspective, these are the most relevant:

2.1 Minimal employer provided support

There is a significant number of expatriates and repatriates who undertake international opportunities without specific employer provided support or a managed transition process (dual career couples, short term transfers, same sex partners, long distance commuters, people with portfolio careers etc). With a focus on travel and transportation of goods and chattels, little time is spent on preparation for the social, emotional, informational and cultural issues they will face on exit or re-entry.

2.2 Domestic benefits

The benefits gained from addressing these issues in an international context will have flow on benefits to the domestic marketplace. The applications could extend to Government Departments (including the Department of Defence).

As an anecdotal example, a member of the Australian Navy was provided with this information <http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/oursay/expertadvice/had.php> to distribute to friends and family to 'ease' their transition from service in the Persian Gulf after an extended deployment during the September 11 crisis. This was clearly an inadequate re-entry process as the person in question ceased a three year relationship within 48 hours of their return. To our knowledge, there were no 'issues' prior to their return and no other debriefing service was automatically provided even though it was 'available.'

Conversely, expeditioners to Antarctica are provided with a very comprehensive exit and re-entry process by the Australian Antarctic Division. <http://www.aad.gov.au> It is modeled on relevant Australian Army procedures.

2.3 English speaking gap

English speaking expatriates and repatriates are not 'connected' to resources. People with a non English speaking background (NESB) are, as a general rule, directly connected to the resources and information they need as the English language training providers have this information available at the training facility and regularly provide referrals to relevant social and cultural communities.



Suburban street

2.4 Australian models

International models could well be adapted to the Australian context, but it would also be extremely valuable to find good Australian models that are already working (perhaps provided by employers with significant numbers of expatriate employees).

2.5 Whole of government

A whole of government approach is essential. Expatriates do not need to deal with three levels of government, various assistance providers and work out which group will provide the information they need. A streamlined approach that has a natural flow from Federal to Local level without arbitrary classification and exclusion along the way is critical. Self management tools will ensure that new processes will be accessible to people of all backgrounds - from a working holiday 20 year old to a business person bringing a \$50 million investment to Australia.

2.6 Community awareness

There appears to be a lack of community understanding of the issues of expatriation and repatriation and friends, families, neighbours, employers, recruiters etc do not always understand the challenges that these people face. Whilst expatriates and repatriates are not seeking an overabundance of 'tea and sympathy,' they are searching for recognition and respect as well as the ability to source new opportunities that will make the most of their new or recently developed skills and talents. Repatriates in particular are keen to share their experience and international networks so that they can maintain a relationship with their international colleagues and friends.



Friends for dinner

2.7 Community perception

Many Australians who have not lived overseas appear to feel threatened by someone with overseas experience. Decision makers will often decline a good employment candidate because the person might 'show them up.' Any conversation about 'what I did in Paris' is not well regarded. The most common excuse used for employment rejection is that you 'do not have any recent Australian experience.' Further discussion on repatriation and finding work in Australia is at

<http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/oursay/ouradvice/mbtm.php> (follow the extra links) and at <http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/oursay/ouradvice/findjob.php>

2.8 Population issues

We are not in a position to comment directly on this, but according to current trends, the number of people entering the workforce will decline significantly from 2020 to 2030. If Australia wishes to remain globally competitive, it needs to secure good quality talent on an ongoing basis, not just before a crisis occurs. If expatriates and repatriates are not treated well, the message that they can 'send out' can be extremely damaging and if they do return overseas, we suspect that they would be far more likely to abandon their international association with Australia as their perception of Australia would be negative.

2.9 Australian culture

Beyond tourism and kangaroos, what is Australian culture? It is so dynamic and fluid with so many cultures here that understanding its current 'status' is difficult. This means that it is even more important to help share and celebrate this culture so that people can understand what it means to be 'Australian' and understand where they fit into the picture. Expatriates living away need to be able to 'touch base' regularly to find out what changes are taking place.

3.0 Practical suggestions

We believe that there are many ways to create meaningful connections, improve processes and manage expectations.

The following information is a small selection of some of our suggestions for enhancements to policies or procedures. We would be happy to provide further information in person or via email.

3.1 Meaningful connections

3.1.1 Enewsletters

Provide expatriates and repatriates with a 'shopping list' of e-newsletters that they can consider subscribing to...general travel bulletins, major government department publications, professional associations, industry bodies etc so that whilst they are away, they can be kept informed. A special publication focusing on 'what is happening in Australia' would also be useful (major sporting achievements, government initiatives, changes in politics, infrastructure etc) – stories not covered by headlines of newspapers but essential to carrying on a 'conversation' with people living in Australia.

Encourage individuals to source electronic contact opportunities with Australia – keeping in touch with friends, family and colleagues via group e-newsletters, bulletin boards, company intranets etc

3.1.2 International Affiliate Membership

Approach professional associations and industry bodies to offer this type of membership at a discounted rate because expatriates who remain as members may be able to pass on their 'connections' overseas and this could improve opportunities here in Australia as they are 'virtual' ambassadors, constantly reminded of their connection to Australia. They can also remain as 'contributors' to the publications and provide real time feedback on industries overseas.



Online networks

3.1.3 Online networks

A personal favourite of ours...designed to encourage people to post comments and concerns at a time that suits. These could be matched to personal or professional interests.

3.1.4 University Alumni Associations

More collaborative approaches for alumni associations both around Australia and internationally.

3.1.5 Business, university and government research sharing

There has been a plethora of USA research produced on the issues associated with relocation. However, it appears that the Australian research has not been widely shared, combined or compiled to make the most of the findings and there is not a regular summary similar to that produced by some of the international surveys repeated each year. A central portal and resource similar to the www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au website would be valuable, especially if it connected various indigenous and multicultural communities around Australia.

3.2 Practical processes

3.2.1 Checklists

Provide sample checklists for people before the move, on arrival, before returning so that they remember to register for information in Australia before they leave, they ensure that their contacts are up to date, they remember to 'ask questions' and expect it to be challenging. Specific checklists to start planning for a return are essential.

3.2.2 Settlement guides

Although there are settlement guides produced by DIMIA, these have been designed with expatriates in mind rather than both expatriates and repatriates. Additions could easily be made.

3.2.3 Interactive self management tools

Specially designed easy to use tools could help an expatriate or repatriate understand how prepared they are for exit, re-entry or settlement. Various questions could help direct them to further information and provide them with an interactive process to connect to various existing local, state and federal programs.

3.2.4 Cross matching service

Through various international government offices (all government levels), Australian expatriates registered as living outside of Australia could be connected to other Australians living in the various cities and regions but also before they return to Australia, various departments (like Austrade) could connect them to organizations based in Australia dealing with their previous country location. When visas or electronic travel authorities are issued, the applicant could be directed to 'register' their information for relevant contact from the government (and to a level they feel comfortable with keeping privacy in mind).



Supper room, Melbourne Town Hall, December 2003

3.2.5 Facilitated networking

Expatriates and repatriates need to establish both personal and professional networks. Social groups that include other 'internationals' will give them an environment where they can discuss 'what I did in Paris' without fear of reprisal. The pressures and demands of networking to find work or business opportunities are not present in these groups and they are a good 'half way house' to re-integration in general Australian life.

3.3 Managing expectations

3.3.1 International Awards

Just as Australians in Australia have an opportunity to participate in various Award Competitions, perhaps Australians living overseas could also be encouraged to participate in an 'International Australian' recognition process. This would have the dual benefit of recognizing their achievement on behalf of Australia whilst overseas but also of raising the awareness of their achievements within the Australian community. Naturally they would need to collect their award in Australia so there may be additional economic and tourism benefits of this initiative. This would be in addition to Australians being nominated for Australian of the Year.

3.3.2 Cultural readiness

Repatriation planning should begin at time of exit, not time of re-entry. A more integrated process where expatriates have an opportunity to access information and/or personal support through these processes would be very valuable. One hour in the beginning can save one hundred hours over a year. Obtaining the necessary paperwork, references etc before leaving the old location can also facilitate faster processing and settlement on re-entry.



Australian living

3.3.3 Realistic time estimates

If the expectation is that everything will happen instantly and it doesn't, then people are disillusioned. If the expectation is that it will take around 12 months to be in a new work role where they are comfortable, and it happens after 11 months, they will be ecstatic. Alternatively, if they think it will be instant and it takes seven months, they will be frustrated for most of that time. It is particularly important for expatriates to be able to access 'international friendly' employers, recruiters and decision makers who understand the 'value' of their experience and networks. Just being 'employed' after six months does not mean 'happy in employment.' The longer it takes to re-establish these people, the quicker the value of their network declines.

3.3.4 Non government resources underutilized

It appears to us that many of the non government services accessible to all residents in Australia are not well known to expatriates and repatriates. There also appears to be a reluctance to seek this kind of assistance. These services could be 'repackaged' in a more user friendly and professional manner to encourage greater utilization – and direct access via online links would be very helpful.

3.3.5 Media coverage

There are an increasing number of stories published in the media about the issues associated with expatriates and repatriates, including this article by David James in BRW magazine, 19 February 2004, 'Faces in a global gallery' reproduced at <http://www.newcomersnetwork.com/mel/information/links/fiagg.php> The vignettes summarise a range of issues that could be addressed by the Senate Committee.