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Expats are not ingrates but fellow citizens

By Michael Fullilove

A million of us live overseas. Canberra should not ignore them.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's speech to the Australian Parliament last month scored high marks from the Canberra press gallery, and justifiably so.

The speech exhibited considerably more flair than any recent Australian speeches on foreign policy, even if Blair sounded as if he knew he was losing the argument on the Iraq war.

But on the same day, Prime Minister John Howard gave a talk that, though unremarkable in form, was equally interesting in substance.

It received virtually no press coverage. In talking about the positive spillovers from globalisation, Howard mentioned that Australia now has a diaspora of around a million people.

"I do not share the view sometimes expressed in my country that isn't that terrible (and) why can't we bring them all home," Howard said. He argued, instead, that for a country such as Australia, a diaspora is both inevitable and desirable. It was a good thing for our people "to go abroad to get experience and sometimes to make their fortune . . . we have to teach our young and our talented to be adaptable, not to be parochial, and I think we've been very successful at it".

Howard is right on all counts. First, the Australian diaspora is talented.

It's also relatively well remunerated, well connected and well disposed to Australia.

Second, the emergence of the diaspora is mainly the result of factors beyond Canberra's control. The globalising labour market means that highly skilled Australians will go where opportunities lie. Short of erecting fences along our coastline to keep people in, or bribing them to return with large sums of taxpayers' money, influencing the development of the diaspora is not within our power.

Finally, if hand-wringing about a "brain drain" is pointless, it is also empirically unsound. Skill losses through emigration have been largely offset by immigration.

Furthermore, while the economic consequences of emigration are certainly mixed, there are tangible benefits that can accrue to a home country from its diaspora. Expatriates can prompt bilateral trade, promote foreign direct investment and act as business "middlemen". When expats return home, as they usually do, they bring with them new skills, experience and networks.

The Prime Minister's position is consistent with public opinion. Sometimes commentators criticise "loudmouth expatriates" who dare to hold opinions on Australian affairs. Howard has himself been guilty of this practice in the past, saying of Germaine Greer, for instance: "If she wants to stay in another country, good luck to her."

This kind of "foreign poppy syndrome" is not prevalent among the general public, however. When the Lowy Institute commissioned opinion polling on the subject, we found that resident Australians are remarkably positive about their offshore cousins. A total of 91 per cent of respondents, for example, agreed that expats are "adventurous people prepared to try their luck

and have a go overseas"; by contrast only 10 per cent believed they "have let us down by leaving Australia".

The Prime Minister should translate this national enthusiasm into government action.

What would a diaspora policy look like? One view is that expats are downtrodden and disenfranchised and require Australia's help. According to some expatriate advocacy organisations - which guard this issue jealously and see themselves as trade unions, despite having no members - we need to give expats unlimited voting rights, if not direct parliamentary representation.

We've seen the effects of such a policy in the past week, with speculation that the balance of power in the Italian Parliament may be held by two men from Essendon and Strathmore. Wait for the backlash from Italians who live in Italy.

Some Australian expats conform to this kind of rights-based approach. One complained to me, for example, that the Government had not informed him of changes to NSW's road rules in the period he lived overseas.

But in my experience this is unrepresentative of most Australians abroad, who are too busy getting on with their lives out in the world to spend time lobbying for tax cuts or protesting about their rights at home.

The better approach is for Australia to increase its efforts to reach out to the diaspora to capture more benefits for Australia.

The Government should take a more co-ordinated approach to engaging with expatriates, not by creating a large new bureaucracy but by taking existing best practices at Australian diplomatic posts and adapting them elsewhere.

It should simplify and advertise the procedures for overseas enrolment and voting to increase the number of eligible expats who vote. Businesses and non-profit organisations should exploit the opportunities offered by expatriates with leading international experience. And our national leaders should articulate the value we place on our expatriates, to draw them further into the mainstream of our national life.

These initiatives were included in a Lowy Institute report on the diaspora released nearly 18 months ago, and given strong and timely support by the Labor Opposition. A similar approach was endorsed by a bipartisan Senate committee more than a year ago.

It is difficult to make policy for a population that lives outside our national borders, but it is surely not beyond us. It is time we did so.

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