

SOCIETY

Tracking the dinky-diaspora

If Australia really is the lucky country, why do almost a million Australians choose to live overseas? **Caroline Overington** reports.

Australia likes to think of itself as a place where people want to live but, increasingly, it is a place that people like to leave. There are now almost one million Australians living overseas, a number that has risen steadily since the 1980s.

Until last week, however, there had not been a serious attempt by governments to find out who these people are, why they leave, whether they are coming back — or whether it matters if they do not.

But now the Federal Opposition is pushing for a Senate inquiry into the so-called "Australian diaspora" with the aim of shedding some light on why 5 per cent of Australians prefer to live somewhere else.

In announcing the study, Senator Nick Bolkus said there was an impression that, when it comes to migration, "the traffic is all one way", which is no longer true.

Australia's consul-general in New York, Ken Allen, notes that there are still Australians who are "amazed by the idea that any of our fellow countrymen would willingly choose to settle overseas. They hear that somebody is going to live somewhere else, and they are likely to say: 'Mate, why would you want to do that?'"

One reason is clear: according

to a recent Federal Government report, half of Australia's expatriates earn more than \$100,000 a year and one third earn more than \$150,000 a year.

But money is not everything. Love also plays a role. Robyn Stephenson met the American who is now her husband via the internet and now lives in Michigan.

"We chatted online, me in Australia and him the US, and then I came out (to Michigan) to visit him," Stephenson says. "His mother took me out to lunch and pleaded with me not to take her son all the way to Australia, because her other son died in an accident when he was 18. So I knew if we were going to get married, I was going to live in America."

The couple now have a five-month-old daughter, Ellie, and Stephenson says that, while she adores the US, it is "absolutely heart-wrenching" to be raising her away from her own parents. "I'm pretty much torn in two," she says.

Stephenson stays connected to other expats through the Southern Cross Group, which is internet-based. Earlier this year, it sent an email to 4000 expatriates, asking for contributions to a book called *Australian Expats: Stories from Abroad*, which would attempt to explain some of the things that Labor's inquiry will also address: why people move away and whether they will come back.

In the foreword, expat author Nikki Gemmill (mostly recently author of *The Bride Stripped Bare*) says she left Australia for London when she was 30 because she wanted to "take a detour from the predictable". She notes that some people feel more like themselves when they are away, "looser, more relaxed,

less in control". She says Australia felt to her like "it's at the edge of the world".

But, she adds: "I am a mother now, and it's changed everything." She feels selfish clinging to a writing career in London while her children miss the "constant presence" of cousins and grandparents.

Conversely, some of the Australians who leave each year do so because they want to be closer to family or to their roots. Adelaide University professor Graeme Hugo last year

conducted a survey of expats, which found that the largest group lives in Britain and the second-largest in Greece. It is fair to assume that many of the people are Australian citizens who have returned to the lands where they were born.

But Hugo's survey also found that, in the past 10 years, there has been a 146 per cent increase in the number of Australian-born people leaving Australia, often for countries to which they have no connection. He notes that emigration to Asia has surged by 50 per cent, and that many of these new emigrants are young adults in their 20s and highly educated and skilled.

The diaspora is one of our greatest national resources.

KEN ALLEN, consul-general in New York

Allen — who has tried in recent years to personally meet all of the 15,000 Australians living in Manhattan — says many Australians leave Australia not because they loathe the place but because they want to take advantage of career opportunities they cannot find at home and to "explore the world and see how they go on the world stage".

He does not believe this constitutes a brain-drain, saying

expats can help strengthen Australia's economic and cultural ties across the globe.

Besides, as Allen noted in a speech earlier this year, there are now more Australians living overseas than in Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the ACT combined.

"I don't mean it seriously but if these people all lived in the same place, they could elect two senators and half-a-dozen members of the House of Reps," Allen said. "We should be thinking about how we can use these people, because the diaspora is one of our greatest national resources."

And, while there might have been a time when members of the diaspora were in touch only at the local pub in London's Earls Court, there are now formidable networks of expats. In the US, many have joined groups such as YAPA (the Young Australian Professionals in America, which has branches in New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Washington DC) or the American Australian Association, while others get together on the internet.

A few years ago, the Southern Cross group lobbied the Federal Government to repeal Section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act 1948, which prevented Australians from holding dual citizenship. This year, the group is lobbying for greater voting rights

for expat Australians, many of whom lose the right to vote when they move.

Similar movements are under way in the US, which also does not count its expats (estimates on the number of Americans living elsewhere range between 3.2 million, which is the State Department's figure, and 10 million, which is the figure used by Census 2010, a group that wants expats counted in the 2010 Census).

Labor hopes the Australian inquiry into emigration will uncover whether the phenomenon is a cost or a benefit to Australia.

Heath St Clair, an Australian actor who now runs an Australian restaurant in New York called The Sunburnt Cow, is probably typical of the people who will be interviewed. He says he left Australia "because I'm a traveller. I don't like to stay in one place." Once he moved, he started to see Australia "as just so far away". And then he married an American woman.

But, even after 10 years in the US, St Clair still thinks about coming home, "especially, maybe, if I had kids. There is innocence and a lifestyle in Australia that I want them to grow up with. But then, my wife might have different ideas."

Caroline Overington is *The Age* New York correspondent.

AUSTRALIANS AROUND THE WORLD

- One million Australians, or roughly 5 per cent of the population, live overseas.
- Half live in EU nations (and half of these live in Britain).
- The second-largest expat group lives in Greece and the third-largest in the US.
- During the past decade, permanent departures increased by 146 per cent.
- Emigration to Asia has increased 50 per cent in five years.
- Most emigrants leave for "better employment opportunities".
- More than half of all expats expect to return to Australia (more if they live in Asia, less if they live in the US).

SOURCE: EMIGRATION OF AUSTRALIANS, GRAEME HUGO, DANNE RUDD AND KEVIN HARRIS, NATIONAL CENTRE FOR SOCIAL APPLICATIONS, UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE, JULY 2003