

## **Expatriate fights for home rights**

By Tracy Sutherland, Brussels

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ANNE MacGregor has a reputation for telling it how it is – and when it comes to Australians living abroad, she says it's a case of "out of sight, out of mind".

"I don't think there's a big conspiracy to exclude us, but what I do think is that there are a lot of things governments do at home, in particular when they make law, which do actually impact on us," says Ms MacGregor, 37, who has become the unofficial voice of expatriate Australians and a needle in the side of politicians of all persuasions in Canberra.

"We need to have a voice, our voice needs to be heard in Canberra – and it's better if that's a collective voice because it's louder and it's stronger and it's more focused and it's more intelligent," she says.

An EC trade and competition lawyer with Linklaters in Brussels, Ms MacGregor and fellow expatriate John Russell co-founded the Southern Cross Group in 2000 amid a growing realisation that the interests of Australians abroad were being all but ignored.

The group's founding coincided with increased interest in the Australian diaspora, which is now one of the world's largest as a percentage of the national population. About 5 per cent of Australians – 1 million people – live overseas, according to recently released federal government figures, compared with 2 per cent of Americans.

The figures have prompted renewed debate in Australia over potential skills shortages and the brain drain from the country as more young professionals choose to work abroad.

"We are a huge unexploited asset to the country, and I think Australia needs us and we need it," says Ms MacGregor, who has 4000 expatriates on her mailing list.

"Australia is really shooting itself in the foot if it doesn't include those people."

Canberra-born Ms MacGregor credits the three years she spent as a young girl living in Geneva – where her father worked for the Australian treasury office – for her passion for Europe.

"That's when I became a Europhile," says Ms MacGregor, who studied law at the Australian National University before winning a scholarship in 1991 to do a masters in trade law at Hamburg University in Germany.

Apart from a short stint in the US, Ms MacGregor – a fluent German speaker – has not since left Europe for more than a holiday.

Casual conversations with Mr Russell – who heads Webber Shandwick PR – about the impotence of Australians living abroad prompted the pair to launch the Southern Cross Group, which immediately took up the fight for dual citizenship for expatriate Australians – a battle that was won in April last year.

Financial investment, overseas experience and international connections are just a few of the significant contributions expatriates can make, Ms MacGregor says. "I think we have to stop thinking about Australia as the people who are just physically there."

The group has been pushing for a parliamentary inquiry into the Australian diaspora – a move supported by the Labour Party – and is hopeful a Senate inquiry will soon get under way.

"You can't expect anything to change if you don't speak up," Ms MacGregor says.