

## **China lures best expats home ... so should we**

By Glenda Korporaal

**SOME years ago the Chinese Government called back home one of its talented expatriates, a scientist with a speciality in solar power happily working at the University of NSW.**

Shi Zhengrong went to the city of Wuxi, where he founded a company called Suntech, now one of the largest producers of solar cell modules in the world, which has also made him one of China's new billionaires.

With its strong economic growth so far, China is attracting home some of its most talented expatriates, who have been studying and working overseas, to use their internationally developed talents to help local industries.

Wuxi, an industrial city northwest of Shanghai, provided seed capital for Shi's company as part of a broader program of financial incentives to lure Chinese entrepreneurs from overseas.

So why aren't we doing likewise? Last month the Brussels-based Southern Cross Group, a lobby group founded in 2000 to campaign for the interests of some of the million Australians living overseas, put a submission to the Rudd Government calling for the establishment of an Australian expatriate and diaspora office.

The group wants the Government to set up a small division within a federal department that would develop a co-ordinated strategy to meet the needs and concerns of the growing number of Australians living and working offshore. It estimates that as many as 40,000 Australians a year are moving overseas long-term, according to arrival and departure records.

Southern Cross founder, Australian lawyer Anne MacGregor, and her associates have worked tirelessly on issues affecting Australians living offshore, including reforms to the citizenship act to make it easier for people who have taken up overseas citizenship to resume their Australian citizenship and for the children born overseas of Australian mothers to take up Australian citizenship. They also urge bilateral social security arrangements with more countries.

One of MacGregor's latest moves is to raise complaints from Australian expatriates who have lived overseas for several years that they have been cut out of the political process by not being able to vote. She says she is still getting complaints after last November's election from overseas Australians who say they want her group to continue the campaign.

The Southern Cross submission says this proposed new government division could help co-ordinate issues affecting Australians living overseas and "develop and lead the implementation of the nation's first Australian expatriate and diaspora policy".

"Although Australia traditionally thinks of itself as a nation of inward migration, in an era of globalisation, our country's overseas community should be a permanent feature of government policies."

Recent changes to the citizenship act have been followed by emotional scenes of Australian war brides from the 1940s in the US resuming their Australian citizenships and their children - now in their 50s and 60s - also choosing to take up dual Australian citizenship.

But, in a very practical sense, Australia has a lot to gain from maintaining ties with the talent pool of its citizens and their families who live around the world.

Even if it does not directly lure them back home as Wuxi and other Chinese cities are trying to do with their expatriates, we can benefit from leveraging on their talents, connections and the huge reservoir of goodwill that these people hold and encourage towards Australia in almost every country. While some have left Australia for family reasons, many have left to seek adventure and challenging jobs offshore.

Some have high-powered jobs covering big territories (such as Asia regional managers), and are following careers simply not available in the relatively small Australian market.

Communication with Australia is a lot easier with cheaper airfares, phone calls and the internet, making it much simpler for those who want to keep in touch with events here. There was a small spotlight on the issue on 2005 with the report of the inquiry into Australian expatriates by the Senate legal and constitutional affairs committee, which attracted almost 700 submissions. The report led to some changes in the citizenship act, but with a new government promising all sorts of fresh ideas, we need a more proactive policy of links with the Australian diaspora.

Australian politicians and tourism officials have fallen over themselves to draw on the glamorous talent of Australian actors to help promote Australia in the US. It's an obvious strategy that could be expanded with some creative thinking.

Across the world there are bankers, financial service experts, scientists, academics, entertainers, teachers, lawyers, entrepreneurs and other professionals who could contribute to local developments, and thought processes.

Some countries go as far as having special seats in parliament representing expatriates, such as France (which has 12 senators who are elected by a 150-member Senior Council of French Abroad) and Portugal, which has four seats in its parliament for its expatriates.

Since 2001 Italy, which has more than three million of its people living overseas, has allowed its citizens living abroad to vote for 12 representatives in the lower house and six in the upper house. Greece has a government-initiated World Council of Hellenes Abroad that co-ordinates the interests of Greek expatriates.

MacGregor's Southern Cross has a database of examples of other similar policies around the world aiming at keeping in touch with expats.

Ironically the federal government was keen to exploit the potential for goodwill with China by feting Shi, who retains a strong affection for Australia. But it was the proactive policies of his birth country which led to his ultimate success.

At a time of skill shortages, it's time that Australia got on the front foot and worked out how to tap into the growing talent bank it already has around the world.

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