



*A Presentation to:*  
***SUGUNA 2003 ANNUAL MEETING***

by

**CONSUL GENERAL KEN ALLEN**

**Topic:**

**"THE AUSTRALIAN  
DIASPORA"**

***VENUE: GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY***

***DATE: SATURDAY 9 AUGUST, 2003***

Good morning ladies and gentlemen

I'm extremely pleased to have been invited to speak to you today.

While I'm not a graduate of Sydney University it has a very special place in my heart. Two of my boys were educated there and I spent a lot of time at St Paul's college drinking some of their very gutsy reds that my sons thought good enough for their father. So while they might have given me a headache from time to time, they did come away with an excellent education.

Sydney University is a wonderful institution that has served Australia and the region well.

This morning I want to talk about about one of our great national resources.

As Australians we normally think of ourselves as being pretty good at recognizing and making the most of the opportunities available to us. In this case, however, we continue to overlook and undervalue a tremendous resource. This untapped resource is the huge pool of talented and highly skilled Australians living and working overseas, in short -- the Australian diaspora.

At first glance the claim that there is such a thing as an Australian diaspora may seem strange.

Australia is, after all, a country built in large part through mass immigration. Peoples from all over the world have -- and continue -- to come to Australia to create a better life. These new Australians, together with our indigenous people and the native born make up the rich and diverse society that is contemporary Australia. Indeed, from British, Greek, Italian, Irish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Afghan, Australia has become a home to many of the world's diasporas.

### ***An Australian diaspora?***

The thought that any of our fellow countrymen would willingly choose to settle overseas does not come easily. Australia is undoubtedly a wonderful place to live, full of extraordinary opportunities.

On learning that someone was going to live overseas we are likely to comment: "mate, why'd you want to do that for?"

In the 1950's and 60's, many talented young Australians left to escape what they regarded as a stultifying, provincial culture. Today their motivations have little to do with any cultural anxiety and far more about their wish to test their talents on a world stage.

The increasing integration of global economies, culture and media are expanding international opportunities which draw Australians overseas.

The same economic logic which makes Australia's future prosperity dependent on our ability to increase exports and attract foreign investment is also pulling a growing number of Australians to pursue career or educational opportunities

abroad. For some this will be for part of their working life. For others it will be permanent.

The number of people leaving Australia – long term or permanently – has been increasing over the last decades and has more than doubled since the early eighties. The Australian diaspora has now grown to a size and significance that requires our attention.

Australians living overseas are currently estimated to number 1 million. That is 5% of the national population or more than Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory combined.

In political terms this is a constituency large enough to warrant a couple of senators and a dozen seats in the House of Representatives. Of course when you float the notion of representation many are unwilling to say it's a good idea as they're worried which way this diaspora might vote!

Over the past couple of decades we have spent vast energy thinking and discussing immigration and multiculturalism at home. On the other hand we have spent precious little time thinking about the emigration of Australians. Yet these offshore communities of Australians will play an increasingly significant role in promoting the interests of Australia in a globalized world.

In a variant on the great Australian pastime of tilting at "tall poppies" we have for most part treated our overseas compatriots with quiet suspicion; however we're not averse to celebrating our Nicole when she wins an Oscar or our Leyton and our Greg when they are ranked number one in their chosen sports.

Clearly, we need to move beyond simplistic images of expats being lost to the home country and sipping gin and tonics on the terrace, or pulling beers in Earls Court. This is why a number of us have started using the term 'diaspora' to refer to our overseas communities.

It is extremely important that we recognize that these are extensive and dynamic offshore communities which maintain strong, two-way connections with Australia.

### ***Drain or gain?***

I want to ask you today whether we should view this exodus as a brain drain as it is often characterized?

My view is absolutely not!

This notion that the Australian emigration represents a 'drain' grew in a context where there was little hard data available.

Recent studies by Professor Graeme Hugo for the Committee for Economic Development of Australia, and by the Centre for Population and Urban Research, show that this picture is a totally false.

Firstly, these studies reveal that emigration of skilled Australians is more than offset by skilled immigration. Hence the outward and inward flows of people does not result in a skills shortage but rather in a net skills gain.

In any case, a large percentage of the Australians who do leave ultimately return – 58% in the case of Australians in the United States. These people not only bring back improved skills but also international experience and a broadened outlook.

Furthermore, the existence of substantial offshore communities of Australians in many of the worlds leading markets makes our access to these markets easier. It helps the flow of ideas and to bring international best practice to Australia.

In short,

- Skilled immigration,
- The growing number of Australians gaining experience in international markets, and
- Vibrant offshore communities,

all contribute to building the overall stock of Australian talent and ultimately economic growth in Australia.

*The Australian* newspaper in an editorial last year expressed the benefits contributed by the Australian diaspora very well:

“Expatriates have helped boost the value of [Australia’s] business and professional services exports to [AUD] \$1.5 billion in 1999. They are our foot in the door to the world’s most dynamic markets, a conduit for ideas and trends. Without them, Australia would be more insular and inward-looking, left behind by the forces driving globalization and denied its benefits.

Expats are our ambassadors-at-large. Their achievements – whether in business, academia, the arts or sport – strengthen our reputation as a diverse nation with an advanced economy. They are, in fact, an under-used national resource.”

### ***Australian diaspora in the United States***

The benefits for Australia of international engagement are nowhere more significant than in our engagement with the world’s pre-eminent superpower – the United States.

While the US census in 2000 confirmed that there were over 60,000 Australians living in the US, there are probably well over 100,000 now.

Now I have the Consul General in Los Angeles telling me that he has a bigger diaspora than mine. Well that could be so, it is estimated that there are 25,000 Australians living in Los Angeles and 15,000 living in New York City. In either case these are substantial numbers.

The recent studies of Australian expats indicate that the United States is the

second most popular destination after the United Kingdom. While this difference has historic roots it is preserved in recent times by the ongoing, relative ease that Australians have in obtaining residency or working visas for the United Kingdom as compared with the United States.

The Australian community in the United States tends to be older and proportionately more skilled than other overseas communities. A high proportion of its members are involved in business, professions, and academia with over 70% holding managerial or professional positions.

A surprising number of American companies have Australians at or near the top -- you name it; Macdonalds, Coca Cola, IBM, Kellogg's, Merck, the list goes on and on.

And it's not just at the top! You find Australians represented in all tiers of American businesses, universities, as well as research, medical and cultural institutions.

To this impressive list we can add those Australians operating Australian businesses here in the United States. Like Westfields, NewsCorp, Visy, Boral, once again the list goes on and on.

I can't stress enough the importance of these strategically placed Australians in helping to grow the business, trade and investments links between the economies of Australia and United States.

### ***Maximizing the benefits***

So how can we help maximize the benefits for Australia that come from having such a significant number of its citizens living overseas?

The first step as Professor Hugo, the Southern Cross Group and many others have suggested is to recognize and broaden our engagement with these communities. We need to start thinking of the Australian diaspora as an integral part of the demographic profile of the Australian nation and a crucial element in our successful participation in an increasingly integrated world.

For that reason, amongst many others, I once again salute this meeting of SUGUNA members.

### ***Engaging with the diaspora***

New technologies, such as e-mail and the internet, have made it much easier for Australians living overseas to keep in touch -- with each other and with their compatriots back home.

Expatriate organizations however continue to be the principle means through which members of the Australian diaspora express their collective identity and have a voice.

Five years ago, no one envisaged that through organizations like the Southern Cross group thousands of Australians -- scattered in all corners of the globe -- could come together over a period of several years to successfully lobby for the repeal of section 17 of the Australian citizenship act 1948. This is the first time to my knowledge that the Australian diaspora expressed itself as a coherent constituency.

The range of expatriate organizations is already impressive. They include; international organizations such as the Southern Cross Group, long-established, national bodies like the American Australian Association, and the recently formed Young Australian Professionals in America -- or YAPA. It also includes more specialist organizations such as the alumni bodies, of which SUGUNA is, once again, a prime example.

As we recognize the significance of the role that overseas Australians play in our countries growing integration within the global marketplace, the need to encourage and strengthen these organizations will become obvious.

These organizations provide -- and will become increasingly important as -- a means for Australian government, business and educational institutions to conduct an effective and ongoing dialogue with members of the Australian diaspora.

One successful example of this dialogue is YAPA's 'State of Origin' series. This series has provided premiers and state government officials with a forum to tap into overseas professionals and business people from their home states.

#### *Facilitating the return of Australians*

One of the most direct ways that Australia gains from having large numbers of its citizens working overseas is when some of these people choose to return home and bring with them their enhanced skills and experience.

We need to identify ways that can make this choice an attractive option while also removing or reducing obstacles that might otherwise discourage Australians who are willing to take that return step.

Obviously this includes many difficult and thorny issues beyond the scope of this paper, issues such as taxation, transportability of retirement savings, recognition of professional qualifications, academic salaries and the availability of research funds.

All these issues -- I might add -- are currently being looked at in the negotiations for the Australia -- United States Free Trade Agreement.

Research shows that return rates are already high and that when Australians do return they do so overwhelmingly for reasons of life style and family.

With so many Australians already positively disposed to returning one relatively simple means of maintaining this high return rate is to ensure that Australians overseas have access to up-to-date information about the opportunities that are available to them back in Australia.

A great example of initiatives that can help in this process is “YAPA careers”. This is a program being developed by YAPA to keep their members aware of career opportunities and employment conditions back in Australia. It also aims to increase awareness of this pool of highly skilled overseas Australian professionals with Australian employers and to provide them with a means of directly recruiting from the group.

### *Promoting the flow of ideas*

Another way we can help maximize the benefits for Australia is by encouraging the communication of ideas and practices being developed by Australian academics and researchers based overseas.

Forums like this one are a very good example, as is the ongoing work of SUGUNA and the other alumni associations.

Indeed, Australian universities are increasing their efforts to engage with their alumni overseas. We are also looking into ways to assist Australian centres of excellence extend their international reach.

A good example of work being done in the area of educational and research exchange is the two-year-old education fund created by the American Australian Association. This year the scheme will provide 6 talented young Australians the opportunity to pursue research interests in the United States.

Another very exciting initiative is being pursued by Professor Bryan Gaensler at Harvard University. He is currently in discussions looking to establish a program that would provide a way of allowing Australian academics teaching in the United States to spend time lecturing and teaching in Australia.

### ***Conclusion***

The Australian diaspora is neither something we can ignore nor a problem we need to solve, it is rather a significant reality.

Like you here today, the Australian diaspora is made up of Australians testing and extending their skills on a world stage, people who -- through their work and achievements abroad -- make some of our most effective ambassadors.

As a government and as a people, we need to invest more in engaging the 5% of our population who reside offshore. We need to start thinking of this diaspora as an extension of the nation and a positive indicator of our ability to play a successful part in the new globalized world.

Australia is one of the greatest countries on earth but could be made even better if we learn to make the most of this tremendous national resource.

We all have something in common we all love Australia.

Thank you.

*Primary sources*

Birrell, Dobson, Rapson and Smith: “Skilled Labour: Gains and Losses”, Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, July 2001.

Garnaut, Ganguly and Kang: “Migration to Australia and Comparisons with the United States: Who Benefits?”, report prepared for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, May 2003.

Hugo, Rudd and Harris: “Emigration from Australia – Economic Implications”, Centre for the Economic Development of Australia, Information paper No.77, June 2001.

Hugo, Professor Graeme: “Australians Moving Overseas”, unpublished paper presented to a meeting organised by the American Australian Association, Southern Cross Group and Young Australia Professionals in America. Australian Consulate General, New York, May 2003.

*General sources*

American Australian Association: [www.americanaustralian.org](http://www.americanaustralian.org)

Australian Bureau of Statistics: [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: [www.dfat.gov.au](http://www.dfat.gov.au)

Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs:  
[www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au)

Southern Cross Group, web site: [www.southern-cross-group.org](http://www.southern-cross-group.org)

United States Census Bureau – Census 2000:  
[www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html](http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html)

Young Australian Professionals in America: [www.yapa.biz](http://www.yapa.biz)