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The Hon. Alexander Downer M.P.
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

On 25th January 2000 there was a meeting of Australians living and working in Belgium to exchange views regarding issues of concern. Over thirty people responded to this impromptu invitation dispatched at short notice.

Among the subjects discussed, many voiced concern at the lack of bilateral social security and health services agreements between Belgium and Australia.

With globalization, there is an increasing incidence of Australians working outside the country for varying periods of their working lives. In the long term this pool of Australians with international professional experience constitutes an asset, assisting the country economically within international markets.

Brussels is an international hub for multilateral organizations, headquarters for multinational companies and a magnet for the offices of the liberal professions, non governmental organizations (NGO) and services which support them. Australians working in that environment presently face additional administrative and financial barriers in comparison to a number of other nationalities. US nationals among others do not contend with such difficulties. The lack of these bilateral agreements is a positive disincentive to remain working in this international environment.

Participants at the meeting agreed to press that the Australian Government seek to negotiate with the Belgium Government in order to conclude bilateral social security and health services agreements in a timely manner. Similar agreements with other European countries such as the Netherlands could provide useful guidance.

Also the meeting agreed to constitute an ongoing group which would address issues of concern to those Australians living and working internationally, and particularly in Europe, such as dual citizenship. It is intended that this group would play a constructive role in its dialogue with the Australian Government.

If you require further information or have any questions regarding the points raised above, do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Russell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "J" and a horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

John Russell

Anne MacGregor