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## Expatriates have a world full of reasons for leaving

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Australia likes to think of itself as a place where people want to live but, increasingly, it is a place people like to leave.

Recent figures indicate there are now almost 1 million Australians living overseas, but there has been no serious government attempt to find out who they are, why they leave, or whether they are coming back.

Now the Opposition is pushing for a Senate inquiry into the so-called Australian diaspora with the aim of shedding light on why 5 per cent of Australians prefer to call somewhere else home.

An inquiry is likely to irritate some, who suspect that those leaving are probably a bit up themselves. This impression was formed in the 1950s and 1960s, when exasperated intellectuals such as Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes fled.

Australia's consul-general in New York, Ken Allen, notes that there are still people in Australia who are "amazed by the idea that any of our fellow countrymen would willingly choose to settle overseas".

One reason is blindingly clear: a recent Federal Government report found that half of Australia's expats earn more than \$100,000 a year, and a third earn more than \$150,000.

But money is not everything. Robyn Stephenson met the American who is now her

husband on the internet, and went to Michigan to meet him.

"His mother . . . 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," Mrs Stephenson said. "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, and Mrs Stephenson said that while she adored the US it was heart-wrenching to bring her child up so far from her own parents.

She stays connected to other expats through the internet-based Southern Cross Group. This year it emailed 4000 expats, asking for contributions to a book called *Australian Expats: Stories from Abroad*.

Some of the Australians who leave each year do so because they want to be closer to family, or to their roots.

Graeme Hugo, a professor at Adelaide University, last year conducted a survey of expatriates which found that the largest group lives in Britain and the second-largest in Greece.

He also found that, in the past 10 years, there has been a 146 per cent increase in the number of people leaving Australia, often for a country to which they have no connection. He notes that emigration to Asia has surged by 50 per cent, often involving "young adults in their 20s, unquestionably more highly educated and highly skilled" than the rest of the population.

Mr Allen - who has tried to meet all of the 15,000 Australians living in Manhattan - said many wanted to take advantage of career opportunities they could not 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 expatriates can help strengthen Australia's economic and cultural ties around the world.

There are now formidable networks of expats. In the US, many have joined groups such as the Young Australian Professionals in America, while others get together on the internet.

A few years ago the Southern Cross Group lobbied the Federal Government to repeal the part of the Australian Citizenship Act that prevented Australians from holding dual citizenship. This year the group is lobbying for greater voting rights for expatriates.

Heathe St Clair, who runs an Australian restaurant in New York called The Sunburnt Cow, said he left home "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", then he married an American.

But, even after 10 years in the US, he 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."