

Australian Passports: Changes May Impact You

Eight million Australians hold passports, and nearly one million of those are Australians who reside abroad.

On 17 February 2004 the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer issued a media release in which he announced that the Australian Government has decided to replace the existing Australian Passports Act with a new Act. A copy of the media release is at:

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2004/fa024_04.html

The Background Paper mentioned in the media release is available at:

http://www.dfat.gov.au/dept/passports/passports_bkg.html

Drafting of the new Act has not yet commenced and Passports Australia is seeking your input by 1 April 2004.

The Southern Cross Group believes that there is potential for the new Act to adversely impact overseas Australians. For that reason, the SCG's Australian coordinator registered his intention to attend the public consultation meeting in Canberra on 5 March. In the event, the other consultation meetings in Melbourne and Sydney were not held due to the absence of any registrations. Our representative was the only registrant for the Canberra meeting.

At the meeting on 5 March the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) representative present indicated that in respect of the arrangements for issue of new passports and the renewal of existing passports there would be little or no change to the existing arrangements. The biometric process uses photos submitted by the applicant as is the case now – people will not have to attend an Embassy or Consulate to have a special photo taken.

Several problems identified by SCG Committee Members in relation to the overseas arrangements were discussed. It was not clear from the meeting that these problems would be addressed in the development of the new Act.

In response to the question of whether DFAT was actively seeking views from Australians living overseas, the DFAT representative at the Canberra meeting indicated that e-mails had been sent to each of Australia's overseas posts with a request that the post circulate the information via their existing networks. DFAT believed that this was the best that could be achieved. The DFAT officer indicated that the Department had not been able to identify any organisation representing overseas Australians to appoint to the Passports Legislation Consultation Group.

The SCG continues to have some concerns about the planned changes, and existing arrangements, as well as the fact that at present there seem to be no plans to change the arrangements for the better.

Issues that we have identified are:

- (1) the intention under the new Passports Act to charge those who lose more than two passports increased fees or to issue them with documents of shorter validity, or both. Although more than 32,000 Australian passports were lost or stolen in 2002-2003, and the new fees would be designed to "encourage Australians to take action to protect their passports", we note that on the Minister's own admission (media release of 4 July 2003)

the majority of people reporting lost or stolen passports are in Australia and not overseas;

- (2) the travel involved if attendance in person is required at an embassy or consulate in relation to passports;
- (3) the fact that an application for citizenship by descent of a child born overseas requires attendance at an embassy or consulate with supporting evidence which is sent to DIMIA for the issue of a Citizenship Certificate and that only when that is received by the parent, can an application for a child's passport supported by the Citizenship Certificate be made in person at the embassy and consulate for the issue of a passport by DFAT. In many cases the travel required for this is an unnecessary expense and time commitment for the parent/s.

You may have other concerns in addition to the above.

The deadline for public comment on the proposed changes has been extended to 1 April 2004. Comments may be e-mailed to the Department at part@dfat.gov.au or sent to the Passports Act Revision Team, RG Casey Building, Barton ACT 0221, Australia, Tel +61 2 6261 1346, Fax: +61 2 6261 2986.

We strongly urge you to let DFAT know your views on the proposed changes together with feedback on recent experiences you may have had in obtaining passports overseas generally, whether before or after the changes announced in late 2003 (see links to 2003 media releases at the end of this message).

The SCG expects to make its own submission to the Department. If you send your input directly to DFAT, we would be glad if you could cc it to our Australian Coordinator, John (Sid) MacGregor in Canberra: sid@southern-cross-group.org (tel/fax 02 6247 6952) as this will help us to gather representative views in the wider Australian expatriate community. We would also like to hear if you became aware of the proposed Passport Act changes from a source other than the SCG.

Kind regards,
Southern Cross Group
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www.southern-cross-group.org

Further Background Information on Australian Passports:

On 17 February 2004 the Minister held a media conference at Parliament House to elaborate on the proposed changes to the Passports Act. The transcript of the media conference is available at:

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/transcripts/2004/040217_press_conference_parl_house.html

Four Ministerial media releases issued in 2003 which relate to passport design and application arrangements are:

FA60 of 4 June 2003 which discusses the adoption of facial biometrics as the worldwide standard for biometric-enhanced travel documents at:

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2003/fa060_03.html

FA82 of 4 July 2003 in which new measures to enhance the integrity of Australia's passport issuing system were announced:

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2003/fa082_03.html

FA145 of 27 November 2003 which launched Australia's new tamper-resistant passport:

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2003/fa145_03.html

and

FA146 also of 27 November 2003 which announced that online passport application forms would be available from the beginning of December. However, the requirement that application forms must be lodged in person at Australia Post outlets, a passport office, or at an overseas post remains in place:

http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/releases/2003/fa146_03.html

The website of Passports Australia is at <http://www.passports.gov.au/Web/index.aspx>