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Expat army fights back

By Claire Harvey

AUSTRALIA'S 830,000 expatriates will become a political force for the first time at the upcoming federal election – but the diaspora feel neglected and disenfranchised by Australia's political parties and electoral laws.

A vocal expatriate lobby is demanding the Electoral Act be reformed, arguing up to 500,000 overseas Australians are unable to vote because of stringent registration rules.

Only 65,000 – or 10 per cent of the estimated adult population of 620,000 – of the Australian diaspora voted in the last federal poll.

Lobby organisation the Southern Cross Group wants to raise this to 100,000 at this year's election.

"Expatriates do feel overlooked, they feel quite bitter. People feel wiped off and neglected," said Southern Cross Group co-founder Anne MacGregor, a Washington DC-based lawyer.

"Australia's future is to be globally connected and wired-in, and we have to use the people who are connected. Expatriates are a real resource."

The growing political influence of expatriates was demonstrated last week when the federal Government agreed to repeal its ban on Australians holding dual citizenship.

The decision came after a concerted email and letter-writing campaign by the Southern Cross Group, web activists at Australiansabroad.com and other expatriate groups.

"Please take into consideration the little people, the ordinary Australians who just happen to live abroad because that's the way their life turned out," NSW-born Janet Magnin, now living in France, wrote to Prime Minister John Howard.

Ms Magnin was writing on behalf of her six-year-old daughter Zoe, who is technically a French citizen with no Australian passport. Zoe was born after Ms Magnin took out French citizenship, unaware that this meant her Australian passport was revoked.

By the time Ms Magnin realised her mistake it was too late. She was able to reapply for Australian citizenship, because the law provided dual citizenship

for those who married foreign nationals. But Zoe cannot become an Australian because her mother was technically French when she was born.

"Does Australia have so many citizens it can afford to throw them away like this?" Ms Magnin wrote.

Saskia Feain, a US-based Australian currently in Hong Kong, told the Prime Minister she dearly wanted to bring her elderly mother to live with her in the US one day – but she was afraid if she took US citizenship she would no longer be an Australian.

John Russell described how Australians in Belgium were forbidden to get drivers' licences or full social security benefits unless they gave up their Australian citizenship.

When the campaign for dual citizenship began last year, Southern Cross Group founders Anne MacGregor and John Russell believed Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock personally supported the change.

But after dozens of meetings with ministerial advisers and bureaucrats in Canberra, it became clear the Prime Minister still had to be convinced, so a meeting was arranged with the PM's chief-of-staff, Arthur Sinodinos.

"We got the impression that in order to convince the Government, it was very important for us to tell personal stories of how the law disadvantaged Australians overseas," Ms MacGregor said. They launched a massive campaign, taking out newspaper advertisements and setting up a telephone hotline in the US to help people write their submissions.

"It was a classic case of internet lobbying," Mr Russell said.

Expatriates in Asia also successfully mobilised last year for a letter-writing campaign targeting Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, asking for Australia Television to resume broadcasts to Asia.

In June the Government provided \$90 million for the ABC to revitalise the service.

Now the expatriate lobbyists are turning their focus to electoral laws.

Voting is not compulsory for Australian citizens overseas, but they face being struck off the electoral roll if they fail to vote in even one election.

Expatriates may register as an overseas voter, but they must do this within two years of leaving the country. If they intend to stay away for longer than six years, they are not eligible to enrol.

The expatriate lobbyists also want the decision to allow dual citizenship to be retrospective so that Australians who lost their passports can get them back and people like young Zoe Magnin can become citizens.