

 THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

Expatriates deserve our support

IF globalisation means dismantling barriers to trade, promoting the spread of new technologies and creating conditions where national borders are increasingly irrelevant to business and finance, then that's exactly what the diasporas of the world have been promoting for centuries. The Chinese, the Jews and the Irish are examples of groups to be forced out along the Silk Routes of the globe but ultimately with an economic impact far greater than the size of their communities.

The Australian international network is a late starter. But this, together with its relatively small size, should not prevent it making a significant impact abroad. Once thought of as largely confined to backpackers on working holidays in London's Earls Court, our 830,000-strong expatriate community is making its presence felt. Australians are going to Asia to jump-start their careers and to the US to further their education. They are regarded highly enough to head global corporations and financial institutions.

Expatriates have helped boost the value of our business and professional services exports to \$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 forces driving globalisation and denied its benefits. Expats are also 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.

Yet many feel disillusioned about the lack of recognition they receive back home. They include some of our best and brightest who have packed up and left in frustration at the lack of support for research and development, our low wages and high taxes.

Australia cannot afford to miss out on the wealth of skills and experience this network has accumulated by creating impediments to their return or their participation in national life. This month's decision to introduce dual citizenship is an important and long overdue reform that will end discrimination against many Australians working overseas. And innovations such as this newspaper's world-first move to deliver an exact online replica of its daily editions to subscribers anywhere in the world can help keep our expats involved in the affairs of their homeland.

But more must be done. Immigration laws that prevent the foreign-born spouses of Australian citizens obtaining permanent residence for two years should be amended. The Commonwealth Electoral Act, which disenfranchises those Australians intending to stay overseas for more than six years, should be changed to take into account our increasingly mobile workforce.

Expats, however, also have obligations. Too many find themselves struck off the electoral roll simply because they didn't bother to register as overseas voters. And they should never be afraid to celebrate their Australianness even if they consider themselves part of an elite group of citizens of the world.