



MEDIA RELEASE

AUSTRALIA DAY 2003

As Australians around the world celebrate Australia Day this weekend, the Southern Cross Group (SCG), an international independent non-profit advocacy and support organisation for Australians overseas, is calling for a Parliamentary inquiry into the Australian diaspora.

John MacGregor, the Group's Australian Coordinator, said that the time had come for the nation to consider how the almost one million Australians living overseas could be better supported and linked into Australia and to examine ways to create more opportunities for expatriates to contribute their valuable skills and knowledge back into the community, even while they remain resident abroad.

"With five percent of all our citizens overseas, just about every Australian at home has an Australian family member or friend living abroad", he said in Canberra. "Despite the federal government's statements that "all Australians share the common bond of citizenship", it seems that governments and other agencies simply forget to factor in those overseas in everything that they do. The number of Australians living overseas is increasing every year, but the number of consular staff in Australian missions and their budgets have shrunk dramatically over the last decade."

The SCG is also concerned that most overseas Australians have lost the right to vote in federal elections, and its views are presently before the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM). Some 100 overseas Australians made personal submissions to the JSCEM in mid 2002. Although most don't have the right to vote at home, many still pay Australian taxes, and legislation passed in Canberra on a variety of subjects nevertheless impacts them.

In addition, expatriate Australians feel snubbed by the National Australia Day Council (NADC). Individuals who are not "principally resident in Australia" cannot be nominated for the Australian of the Year awards administered by the NADC. This requirement ignores the continuing and significant contribution made to Australia by expatriates in a multitude of ways and sends a message to almost a million citizens that they don't count. The SCG's request to the NADC to eliminate this requirement and the Group's proposal for a new Expatriate Australian of the Year Award has been rejected. The SCG wrote to the Prime Minister on this matter before Christmas.

Citizenship issues are also close to the hearts of expatriates. Several thousand permanent residents will become Australian citizens by grant this weekend. Robyn Stephenson, the Group's North American Coordinator, said from Michigan that it was inconsistent for the government to allow migrants to become Australian citizens after only two years permanent residency, while at the same time ignoring the plight of former Australians who lost their citizenship before Section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act 1948 was repealed with effect from 4 April 2002. "Most of these former Australians were born and grew up in Australia and have spent far longer than two years in the country. People overseas who lost their citizenship before 4 April 2002 and cannot make a declaration of intention to return to Australia to live within three years are still being excluded from the Australian family", she said. "The government must re-examine existing legislation on the resumption of lost citizenship".

Further information and documentation on these and other diaspora issues can be downloaded from the SCG's website at www.southern-cross-group.org

Contacts:

In Canberra: John MacGregor, tel 02 6247 6952, mobile 0418 621 918, sid@southern-cross-group.org

In Michigan: Robyn Stephenson, tel +1 616 392 6228, robyn@southern-cross-group.org

In Brussels: Anne MacGregor, tel +32 474 950 131, anne@southern-cross-group.org

Thursday 23 January 2003