

Election 2001

 2 DAYS TO GO

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THE EXPATRIATES

Voting begins around the globe

Claire Harvey

VOTING has already begun at the nation's biggest polling booth, and it's not in Sydney or Melbourne — it's in the heart of London.

Up to 25,000 Australians living or holidaying in Britain will cast their ballots this week at Australia House in central London.

Refugees, terrorism and the Australian dollar are the big issues for the 830,000 Australians overseas, according to expatriate lobbyists.

"Australians living overseas are probably slightly more broadminded than those in Australia, as a generalisation," said Anne Macgregor, the Washington-based co-founder of the Southern Cross Group, which campaigns for greater voting rights for Australian expatriates.

"The impression you get over here is that the country has become more inward-looking, and that is a big concern. A lot of the people we talk to are concerned that Australia is becoming more insular."

Saskia Feain, co-founder of the Australians Abroad network, said refugee issues became a concern in September, when the federal Government turned away the Norwegian ship Tampa after it picked up a boatload of asylum-seekers.

"A lot of expats were absolutely disgusted. Howard wouldn't let in the refugees from the Tampa," she said.

"People were really offended that our nation treats people in such a cruel way — but since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, a lot of expats have changed their minds."

"Now in our website chatrooms, and among the expats I speak to, there is a real feeling you have to be very careful about who you let in."

Only 65,000 overseas Australians voted in the 1998 federal election, but the Southern Cross Group has mounted a campaign this year to encourage 100,000 expatriates to exercise their right to vote.

At the Hong Kong consulate-general, more than 2500 people had voted by yesterday, and another 11,000 will cast their votes by the close of polling on Saturday evening.

In Bangkok, up to 100 a day have voted, as well as another 1000 in New York and several hundred in Washington.

In London, the Liberal and Labor parties have been handing out how-to-vote cards as people line up to vote.

"We've targeted Australian pubs, especially during the broadcasts of AFL and NRL grand finals," said the Liberals' British campaign director, Geoff O'Connell.

He and Scott Pilnpton, of the Labor UK Society, have advertised in expatriate magazines and held election parties to get out the message.