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### International Features

## No-vote expats urged to speak out

**Australian expats are being urged to support a new campaign that will give them back the right to vote. Aaron Gray-Block writes.**

Expatriate voting is becoming a hot Australian issue.



Though the Aussie election came and went, and a new Liberal-National coalition installed for its third term, life did not return to normal for everyone.

The Southern Cross Group (SCG), a lobby group representing Australian expatriates, intends to stir the ashes with a New Year submission to the parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

The Australian Electoral Commission figures revealed that Australian consular posts overseas issued a total of 63,016 votes to Australians overseas for the 10 November 2001 election," Belgium-based lawyer, Anne MacGregor, who co-founded the SCG, said.

Not all of these votes would ultimately have been counted in the final tally, as some were issued as postal votes. The number of postal votes returned is always less than the number sent out.

The 2001 figure was down about 2,000 on the 1998 election, when 65,086 votes were issued to Australians overseas. In the November 1999 Referendum on the Republic, only 57,955 votes were issued overseas.

MacGregor blamed the continuing low turnout on the high number of expats who have lost their right to vote.

"They have been disenfranchised by the technicalities of voting," she said, labelling the situation a "breach of fundamental human rights".

### A web of red-tape

MacGregor said expats who missed voting at a federal election or referendum were removed from the electoral roll.

To become re-enrolled, expats had to return home to Australia for at least one month, but many expats did not go home for their holidays, she said.

Other problems included the fact that expats could only enrol to vote within two years of leaving the country.

MacGregor said 615,000 expats across the globe were of an eligible age to vote, but about 500,000 of them were not voting, equating to 5 percent of Australia's 12.5 million eligible voters.

She cited last year's US presidential election contest between eventual winner President George W Bush and Al Gore, and the increased importance that postal votes took on.

### **Expats urged to act**

In light of this, MacGregor urged Australian expats to contact the Southern Cross Group to have their stories accumulated in a submission for changes to the Australian Electorate Act.

The lawyer said the submission would be lodged in early 2002 with the Joint Standing Committee, which reviews the electoral act after every election.

Changing the electoral act was considered possible, she said, and not as difficult as constitutional changes via referendum, of which, only eight have been successful in Australian history.

But MacGregor said changes to the electoral act were difficult and the people who wanted the change were not included on the electoral roll.

As part of the global community, Australia needed to recognise the existence of expats and ensure their rights, she said. She said expat voting — as an issue — was also linked to debates about the lack of an Australian bill of rights.

MacGregor said guaranteed voting should be spelled out in a bill of rights and issues such as dual citizenship — which the parliament presently did not allow — needed constitutional protection.

A bill of rights was last discussed in the lead-up to the rejected referendum proposal in 1999 asking if Australia should become a republic. This discussion melted away once the referendum was defeated by a large public majority.

Despite this, MacGregor said the SCG's first moves would be to make a submission to the electoral review committee before deciding on the next step.

She urged other expats to make sure their voice was heard and said they could make a submission to the Southern Cross Group.

The address is [www.southern-cross-group.org](http://www.southern-cross-group.org)

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