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Most Australian expats 'remain disenfranchised'

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AMSTERDAM — Australian expat lobby group the Southern Cross Group (SCG) cautiously welcomed on Friday legislation passed by the Australian Parliament enabling a small number of disenfranchised overseas Australians to vote.

But despite the legislative change, the SCG said time restraints meant that disenfranchised expats will probably not be able to vote in the 2004 federal election, tipped by some to occur in September or October this year.

And some 500,000 Australian expats of voting age will remain stripped of the right to vote in even after the amendments to the Electoral Act enter into force.

The Electoral and Referendum Amendment Act 2004 was passed by the Senate on Thursday, but will enter into force only 28 days after Governor-General Peter Jeffery gives royal assent, which is expected to take place within the next few weeks.

Three provisions in the new Act amend sections dealing with enrolled voters leaving Australia and enrolment from outside Australia.

Those already on the electoral roll currently have only a two-year window of opportunity once they've left Australia to change their status with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) to that of Eligible Overseas Elector.

Similarly, those not on the electoral roll when they leave the country or whose names are removed for whatever reason after they leave have a two-year window to enroll afresh after departure.

Both two-year windows will now be extended to three years.

In addition, an Australian enrolling from overseas is currently only entitled to do so if they have ceased to reside in Australia for reasons relating to their career or employment or for reasons relating to the career or employment of their spouse.

This requirement will be removed when the amendments to the Electoral Act passed on 17 June enter into force.

"These small changes have been enacted as a result of continued advocacy work by the SCG on behalf of thousands of voteless Australian citizens overseas," SCG co-founder Anne MacGregor said from Brussels.

"(But) our view remains that it is absolutely inappropriate to impose any time limitation whatsoever on the period for enrolment from outside Australia and for registration as an eligible overseas elector.

"Any Australian citizen overseas should be able to enroll to vote at any time. The right to vote is a fundamental right attached to citizenship."

Once in force, the changes will benefit only expat Australians who left the country between two and three years ago. But anyone who is no longer on the electoral roll and who left Australia more than three years ago will still be prevented from enrolling and will therefore remain disenfranchised.

The SCG urged all Australian expats who have not lost the right to vote to act now to make sure that their enrolment details are in order well in advance of the forthcoming federal election.

Once the election is called, there will only be a seven-day period for people to enroll or to change their enrolment details until the rolls are closed.

Anyone not sure whether they are still on the electoral roll can send an e-mail to the AEC at info@aec.gov.au stating their full name, date of birth, and address or addresses for which they have been enrolled previously. The AEC will then confirm or deny their enrolment.

The AEC can also be reached on +61 2 6271 4411, or visit the AEC website at www.aec.gov.au. The SCG website address is www.southern-cross-group.org.

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