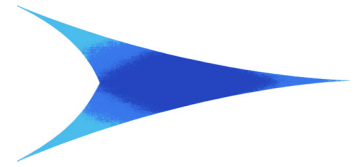


The Southern Cross Group

Promoting Mobility in the Global Community
www.southern-cross-group.org



MEDIA RELEASE

Better Electoral Education Efforts Crucial for Intending Expats and Australians Already Overseas

The Southern Cross Group (SCG) has called for active, intensified electoral education outreach efforts directed at Australians going abroad and those already overseas.

In a major submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education, the SCG has underlined the strong nexus between youth disengagement and the diaspora. In 2005, 158,440 Australian residents left Australia "permanently" or with the intention to remain abroad for at least a year. Another 4.75 million left Australia for periods of less than one year. A very high proportion of those going abroad are young people.

It is Parliament's intention that eligible voters leaving Australia should be able to vote from abroad. But electoral participation rates by eligible voters outside the country are presently disturbingly low.

Voting is voluntary for Australian citizens overseas at the time of an election. British research indicates that in a voluntary system, many young non-voters will remain non-voters as they grow older. The SCG argues that in Australia the vast majority of citizens support compulsory voting for the resident population, which itself has given rise to a culture, or norm, of universal participation. With this in mind, Australia should be striving to keep those in the diaspora connected to the country while they are away by allowing and actively encouraging them to exercise their fundamental right to vote from offshore.

Among several identifiable reasons for low participation among expats, two hurdles stand out that can be addressed by the Australian government:

- Many Australians resident abroad (perhaps in excess of 500,000) are no longer enrolled and restrictions in Section 94A of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* prevent them from re-enrolling while they remain living abroad if they ceased to reside in Australia more than three years ago;
- Many departing Australians and Australians already abroad are ignorant of the rights and responsibilities in Australia's electoral system applicable to them, which change once they are offshore. Although resident eligible voters departing the country still have the right to vote, many have simply not been alerted to the different enrolment and administrative technicalities which, if ignored for too long, can result in inadvertent but permanent disenfranchisement while a person remains resident abroad.

Legislative change is required to address the first hurdle, and the Senate's Constitutional and Legal References Committee recommended such a change at the conclusion of the Inquiry into Australian Expatriates in March 2005. The government has yet to respond to that recommendation. The JSCEM, although mandated to consider electoral matters, has declined to consider or endorse the Senate Committee's recommendation.

In its latest submission to the JSCEM, the SCG has set out a host of practical suggestions, achievable without legislative amendment, which would greatly raise electoral participation among overseas eligible voters and in particular young overseas eligible voters even within the current limitations of the law.

To read the SCG's submission and others made to the Civics and Electoral Education Inquiry go to:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/em/education/subs.htm>

Are you an expat and not sure whether you can still vote from abroad? See:

http://www.southern-cross-group.org/archives/Overseas%20Voting/2006/Brochure_Expats_Voting_April_2006.pdf

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The Southern Cross Group is a global non-profit volunteer-run advocacy and support organisation for the Australian diaspora.

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