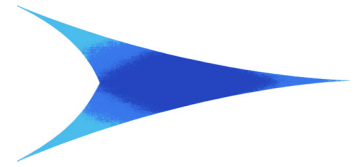


The Southern Cross Group

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



MEDIA RELEASE

Expats Welcome PM's Diaspora Comments but Call for Action, not Words

The Southern Cross Group (SCG) today applauded Australian Prime Minister John Howard's comments on the importance of the Australian diaspora for the nation, but called upon the Government to do more than just talk about the country's overseas citizens.

The Prime Minister's remarks were made during an address to the Australia/UK Leadership Forum in Canberra on 27 March attended by British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Pointing out that there are now over a million Australians who live overseas, Mr Howard said "That is no bad thing. ... I would make a very, very strong plea in any discussion about the human capital aspect of globalisation for us all to embrace the notion of mobility of talent around the world, it's part of globalisation and Australia can be both a contributor to and a beneficiary of that process."

Speaking from Brussels, Anne MacGregor, Co-founder of the Southern Cross Group, said, "We are pleased that the Prime Minister has explicitly underscored the value of our sizable diaspora. This is a very significant acknowledgement of the multi-faceted campaign that the SCG has been pursuing for almost seven years on behalf of Australia's global community. In the late 1990s the concept of an "Australian diaspora" was on no one's radar screen."

However, she called upon the Government to do more than just talk about overseas Australians. "It's over a year since the Senate's Legal and Constitutional Committee tabled its findings in the Inquiry into Australian Expatriates", she said. "That Inquiry lasted nearly 17 months and almost 700 submissions were made from Australians in every corner of the globe. The Committee's Report made a number of key recommendations. That document is there to serve as an initial blueprint for Australia's engagement with its diaspora in the immediate future. But the Government's response to that Report remains outstanding."

Ms MacGregor said that there was increasing scepticism among a growing number of overseas Australians that the hard work which went into the Inquiry into Australian Expatriates may have been in vain. Contributing to the Inquiry had been an important and unprecedented opportunity to make their voices heard, because many overseas Australians are legally prevented from voting in Australia. The SCG estimates that in the order of half a million adult Australian citizens are presently disenfranchised by provisions in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* which prevent electoral enrolment for many expatriates.

One recommendation resulting from the Expatriates Inquiry Report of March 2005, if enacted into law by the Government, would significantly, although not entirely, alleviate these difficulties. Government senators on the Committee explicitly supported that recommendation.

"We urge the Government to give us its response to the March 2005 recommendations without any further delay", said Ms MacGregor. "There is still time to enact amendments to the Electoral Act so that they enter into force before Australia's next federal election. It is unacceptable for a modern democracy such as Australia to have electoral legislation which imposes civil death on such large numbers of engaged and informed citizens."

March 2005 Expatriates Inquiry Report: http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon_cte/expats03/report/index.htm

Full text of PM's Speech of 27 March 2006: <http://www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech1840.html>

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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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