



About the Southern Cross Group

History and Formation

The Southern Cross Group is an international volunteer-run and independently funded advocacy and support organisation for the Australian Diaspora. It was founded in January 2000 at a "town hall" style meeting held in Brussels, Belgium, attended by some 35 local Australians. Those present at the founding meeting were of the view that there was a need for an advocacy organisation which could actively focus on and work for changes to law and policy that negatively impacted or disadvantaged those in the Diaspora.

Although there were already a number of Australian expatriate organisations in existence in various countries, those at the SCG's founding meeting recognised that there was no single organisation which was international in scope. Further, and more importantly, experiences with various existing groups had shown that their activities all stopped short of active advocacy. There was also a perception among some of the more established expatriate organisations that it was not their role to "speak out" or "lobby", despite the fact that many of their individual members had or still have needs and concerns later taken up by the Southern Cross Group.

With that in mind, rather than trying to work within any one existing national or regional Australian expatriate organisation, it was felt that it was time to create a new and independent international non-governmental organisation that could speak and work on behalf of all in the Diaspora on issues of common interest.

The SCG's philosophy is that those in the Australian Diaspora are a fundamental part of Australia in today's globalised world. Put simply, Australia is the sum of all Australians, regardless of their geographic location.

Constituency

From its inception, the SCG has taken the widest and most inclusive approach possible in defining its constituency. The Group strives to be an organisation that is relevant for and can serve all those in the Diaspora, ranging from the newly-born to working holiday makers in their 20s, highly-skilled professionals, trailing partners, or Australian-born WW2 war brides now in their 80s and 90s to name just a few. It welcomes contacts and input from all those in the Diaspora and indeed in Australia, regardless of age, ethnic background, length of time spent outside Australia, gender, education or occupation. The term "Diaspora" is used rather than "Australian Citizen" so as to make clear that the SCG is accessible not only to those who are legal Australian citizens, but also former Australian citizens and anyone else with a family or other connection or genuine interest in Australia.

Volunteer Committee

In mid 2000 the SCG's first website was established and in an instant, the Group was global. From an initial small core of volunteers in Brussels, the SCG's Committee network today has grown to encompass approximately 100 individuals in almost 40 countries. Some volunteers have chosen to take on the role of local country or regional coordinator and have their contact details listed on the relevant page of the Contact Us section of the SCG's website. Often they contribute to the building of relationships between the SCG and other Australian expatriate organisations in their area as well as local event organisation. Other volunteers participate behind the scenes, for example in the development of policy work, the provision of administrative and technical IT support, the

answering of queries, media monitoring, or the organisation of local SCG events. Communication and interaction among SCG Committee volunteers is constant and primarily by e-mail.

The great diversity of Australia's Diaspora is fully reflected in the composition of the SCG's own volunteer Committee, which includes retired people, trailing spouses, students, professionals and others, both in Australia and overseas. There is no boilerplate profile for an SCG volunteer. The only requirement is that the person shares the philosophy and objectives of the Group and seeks to participate. Some volunteers dedicate many hours each month to the work of the SCG, whereas others have less time to give, depending on their existing work and family commitments at any point in time. New volunteers are always very welcome. Inquiries should be addressed to info@southern-cross-group.org or your local volunteer listed on the SCG website.

Support Function: Diaspora Advice Bureau

While the "advocacy" or "lobbying" objective of the SCG was perhaps uppermost in the minds of the Group's co-founders in early 2000, it quickly became clear that a "support" function would necessarily and naturally have to go hand-in-hand with any advocacy role. Put simply, the SCG would not know what to go out and lobby for if it was not in constant dialogue with individuals in the Diaspora. Further, the reactions and input received from the Diaspora make it possible for the SCG to take considered positions which reflect the generally shared views and concerns of its broad constituency. By continually listening to those who contact the Group, over time various issues of common interest emerge.

Indeed, many expatriates getting in touch for the first time tell the SCG that they thought they were the only person who had a particular concern until they found the Group's website or heard about the Group through some other avenue. A large percentage of queries received by the SCG today have already been answered many times previously, and its volunteers have built up various information resources to field many of the questions commonly asked.

A crucial aspect of the SCG today therefore is its virtual "Community Help Line or Drop-in Centre" function for the Diaspora, with its volunteers in many countries often providing "Citizens Advice" for the Australian community overseas on issues specific to that community. Sometimes, when a person's query cannot be adequately handled by an SCG volunteer, they will be referred to a reputable professional that the SCG believes can offer quality service and advice. On other occasions, those who contact the SCG simply want to connect with other Australian individuals or social or business networking organisations in their area. Or they may be still in Australia planning to move overseas to a particular country and seeking some tips in advance. Often, our volunteers do no more than provide a friendly ear and share the benefit of their own experience as an Australian expatriate in a particular country.

In 2007, much of the SCG's volunteer time has been dedicated to individually assessing over a thousand people in the Australian Diaspora who have contacted it inquiring as to their eligibility for Australian citizenship under the *Australian Citizenship Act 2007*. Those who are found to be eligible are then provided with considerable one-on-one assistance and support in preparing their applications.

Website and E-Bulletin List

In addition to the one-on-one interaction the SCG has through its volunteers with members of the Diaspora worldwide, its website has been developed over time to provide key information on core topics of interest. It contains a number of links to the information pages on the websites of Australian government agencies as well as a comprehensive archive of SCG media releases, policy documents, submissions to inquiries, letters to Australian parliamentarians and other material.

Many visitors to the website choose to sign up to the SCG's e-bulletin list, which now contains the e-mail addresses of more than 8,000 individuals in more than 85 countries. Although there is a constant and unavoidable rate of attrition as people move and/or change their e-mail address and out-of-date addresses are removed from the list, the subscriber list has grown consistently in the last seven years from an initial list of only 200 Australians in Belgium at the beginning of 2000.

Free information on SCG events and the work of the Group is regularly circulated to subscribers through this medium. Individuals may unsubscribe themselves or update their contact information at any time using the link included at the bottom of every message sent out. In the privacy statement displayed on its website, the SCG undertakes to keep the personal data about those who sign up fully confidential. E-bulletins might be sent to the entire subscriber list worldwide, or only to subscribers in a particular country or countries, depending on the subject matter. Most subscribers to the list have identified the country they are in, although some have chosen not to nominate their country of residence at the time they signed up. Those for whom no country of residence has been nominated receive only those e-bulletins sent to the entire list, and not country-specific messages.

The penetration of SCG e-mail bulletins is much wider than merely the number of subscribers on the list at any one time. Many of the addressees are office holders or members of other Australian expatriate groups in many countries who in turn pass on SCG messages through their own e-mail lists and newsletters. It is not uncommon for an SCG e-bulletin to be reproduced wholesale and circulated within many other organisations either by e-mail or snail mail in the days and weeks following its initial release. Many organisations also place notices based on SCG information on their websites, and some carry links to the SCG website.

With the "forwarding on" effect of the family and friends networks among the SCG's original e-bulletin recipients, the SCG estimates that its messages and media releases reach at least two to three times the number on its direct e-mailing list.

Many in the Diaspora and in Australia simply "drop in" to visit the SCG website for updates and information without ever joining the e-bulletin list. Presently, approximately 1000 people use the site every day, viewing one or more pages during their visit.

On several occasions the SCG has posted information on its website and sent out e-bulletins about research and/or surveys being conducted into the Australian Diaspora, or other non-commercial opportunities or events, helping the academics or the organisations concerned to reach significant numbers of Australians overseas. The Group remains willing to circulate non-commercial information of general relevance to the Diaspora through its networks, within the limitations imposed by the privacy statement displayed on its website.

In August-September 2006, the SCG partnered with Advance in conducting *One Million More* – an independent online survey of Australians abroad timed to coincide with the official Australian census which does not count expatriate

Australians. As at the date of closing (30 September 2006), 9,529 people had started the survey as individuals or as part of a family unit, representing 16,902 people, with 8,578 of those people completing the survey (a 90% completion rate).

The data collected was provided to Professor Graeme Hugo, Australia's leading Diaspora demographer, at the University of Adelaide, and conclusions based on the study of that data are expected to be available during 2007.

No Formal Membership or Membership Fee

There is no formal "membership" of the SCG as such, and no membership fee of any kind. The policy has always been not to exclude people or discourage participation by limiting access to parts of the website or e-bulletins to paid-up subscribers or "members". The success of the Group today can be largely attributed to this inclusive policy, which has led to continued and rapid growth in e-bulletin subscriber numbers and site visitors, as well as a steady increase in the number of e-mail and telephone comments and queries received by the SCG's volunteers every day.

Media Profile

The SCG regularly puts out media releases to a list of more than 1,000 Australian journalists in Australia and overseas, and has worked hard to gain a significant media profile in Australia in order to raise awareness at home of the some one-million Australians who now live abroad and their specific needs and concerns. Indeed, it was the SCG that first coined the phrase "Australian Diaspora" that is so often used in the Australian media today. SCG volunteers have regularly been quoted in numerous newspaper and magazine articles and have appeared on television and taken part in live and pre-recorded radio in Australia and overseas on expatriate-related topics.

Recent media successes include extensive Australian television, radio and print media coverage over ANZAC Day 2007 concerning the resumption of Australian citizenship for WW2 Australian-born war brides in the United States, and further coverage on citizenship law reforms when the operative provisions of the *Australian Citizenship Act 2007* came into force on 1 July 2007.

Achievements in Citizenship Law Reform

The SCG is probably best known for its efforts in the area of Australian citizenship law reform. As a result of a long campaign supported by thousands of expatriates, on 4 April 2002 Section 17 of the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948* was repealed. As of that date, an Australian who acquires another citizenship no longer automatically forfeits their Australian citizenship under Australian law and can be a dual citizen, as long as the law of their new country of citizenship does not require them to formally renounce their Australian citizenship. Since 4 April 2002, many Australians in the UK, the US, Canada and many other countries have become dual citizens as a result of this important change.

On 7 July 2004 the then Australian Minister for Citizenship announced that the Government would make a number of further reforms to Australian citizenship law to help those in the Australian Diaspora. This was largely in response to the SCG's campaign on behalf of those who lost their Australian citizenship before 4 April 2002 and who did not qualify to use the citizenship resumption provision in the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948*, as well as its lobbying work on other deficits in Australian citizenship law negatively impacting those in the Diaspora. Detailed policy arguments for these reforms were set out in the SCG's submission to the Senate Inquiry into Australian Expatriates in early 2004 as well as in other lobbying submissions made since 2000.

The reform package, which eventually entered into force on 1 July 2007 in the form of the *Australian Citizenship Act 2007*, also improves the rules on acquiring citizenship by descent, so that certain groups of individuals born overseas to Australians, who were not previously legally entitled to be Australian citizens by descent, can now be formally welcomed into the Australian family. It also contains provision for those born abroad to a person who had already lost Australian citizenship under Section 17 at the time of the child's birth to apply for Australian citizenship by conferral. A large beneficiary group in the Diaspora is surviving Australian-born war brides who settled in the United States in the 1940s and subsequently forfeited their Australian citizenship under the old Section 17, as well as their US-born children.

In total, the SCG estimates that the 2007 Act provides a new right for some 100,000 individuals outside Australia to apply for Australian citizenship. The SCG provided considerable input to Government as the new legislation made its way through parliament after the Bill was first tabled in November 2005. Most notably, the SCG made a number of very substantial submissions to the Senate Inquiry which examined the Bill in early 2006.

Some of those submissions, and work done since by the SCG, draw attention to a number of further citizenship reforms which are still needed to Australian law for the Diaspora community. Although almost all of the SCG's key citizenship reform goals have now been accomplished, there are still special pockets of people in the Diaspora who remain, in the view of the SCG, unfairly excluded from Australian citizenship at the present time. Work will continue on behalf of those groups of people.

Other Advocacy Issues

High on the SCG's list of priorities, second only to the SCG's efforts on citizenship, is obtaining the right to vote for the many thousands of adult overseas Australian citizens who are presently legally disenfranchised. The SCG's separate leaflet "What you need to know about voting in Australian elections while overseas" sets out this issue in further detail. Work to date has yielded limited, but insufficient legislative change, despite a plethora of submissions to different government inquiries, media work, and other ongoing efforts.

The SCG continues to push for the establishment of a special "Expatriate Australian of the Year Award" to accompany the Australian of the Year, Young Australian of the Year and Senior Australian of the Year awards administered by the National Australia Day Council (NADC). In 2003, as a result of representations by the SCG, the NADC removed the requirement that nominees for Australian of the Year be "principally resident in Australia". Despite this welcome change, the SCG believes that the expatriate community would be more aptly served by a dedicated Expatriate Australian of the Year Award. Such an award would also help raise awareness within Australia of the unique contribution offshore Australians make to the country.

In Canberra, the SCG continues to lobby the federal government to enter into further bilateral working holidaymaker visa arrangements with various countries additional to those already negotiated.

The SCG also continues to advocate the conclusion of additional bilateral social security agreements between Australia and countries where significant numbers of Australians live, so that pension contributions made to overseas government social security schemes are not forfeited when expats retire back to Australia.

The SCG's website provides up-to-date and detailed information on all the issues the Group is working on.

Australian Expats: Stories from Abroad

In June 2003 the SCG put out a global call for Australian expats to "tell their stories" for a unique publishing project never before attempted. Over 180 personal non-fiction tales of Aussie life abroad were eventually received for our Book Project, and in October 2003 the Group released *Australian Expats: Stories from Abroad* jointly with Australian publisher Global Exchange. The book contains 33 stories of Australian expat life in numerous countries, most by first-time authors, and a thoughtful foreword by well-known Australian author Nikki Gemmill. Writers whose stories were not selected for the book were given the opportunity to have their story published on the SCG website where many can now be read online. The 240-page paperback book can be ordered directly from the SCG website, from *Amazon.co.uk*, *Amazon.com*, *Amazon.ca* and Australian bookshops as well as various SCG volunteers.

Also available from the SCG's website is the November 2004 issue of *Griffith Review*, entitled "Our Global Face". Published by ABC Books and Griffith University, this innovative publication takes the Australian Diaspora as its theme for Issue 6. It contains various pieces of original fiction and non-fiction writing, poems and photo reportages, including a contribution about the SCG and its virtual lobbying activities.

Senate Inquiry into Australian Expatriates

In 2002 and 2003 the SCG made various representations in Canberra calling for a comprehensive and dedicated parliamentary inquiry into all aspects of the Australian Diaspora. As a consequence, in October 2003, the Australian Senate's Legal and Constitutional References Committee opened an Inquiry into Australian Expatriates with very broad terms of reference. Following efforts by the SCG and other groups to promote the inquiry to Australians internationally, almost 700 submissions were made by the initial deadline of 27 February 2004. The SCG itself made a number of substantial submissions on a variety of matters. The Committee reported to Parliament on 8 March 2005. It made 16 good recommendations on a number of issues, including, notably, a recommendation to substantially amend the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* in ways which would have re-enfranchised many, but not all, adult overseas Australians who have been abroad for more than three years.

The Government did not respond to those 16 recommendations until 7 December 2006. Unfortunately, it rejected 8 out of the 16 recommendations, including the key recommendation concerning amending the *Electoral Act*. Other minor recommendations to amend the *Electoral Act* which assist Australians leaving Australia in the future from losing their right to vote were accepted and were enacted into law, coming into force in July 2006.

Further information about the Inquiry into Australian Expatriates as well as the many submissions received by the Committee and hearing transcripts can be read at:

www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon_ctte

SCG Events

Attempting to serve all those in the Diaspora and be a truly "international" organisation presents special challenges. It would be impossible to run the SCG without internet and e-mail, and it has been possible to a large extent to build a sense of "virtual" community which previously did not exist in the Diaspora through these mediums. But "live" meetings are also important. The SCG has held a number of functions in various cities to provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction, discussion and celebration.

Several events have to date been held in **London**, the city with more Diaspora members than any other. These include:

- A "Dual Citizenship Party" to celebrate the repeal of Section 17 of the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948* in April 2002;
- An Australian Citizenship Affirmation Ceremony in February 2003 at which the then Citizenship Minister Gary Hardgrave presided;
- An Evening with Professor Graeme Hugo from Adelaide University in May 2003 looking at recent Diaspora research;
- Various UK Visa Info Nights (jointly with TNT Magazine);
- The worldwide launch of the book *Australian Expats: stories from abroad*, a joint publication between Global Exchange and the SCG, in October 2003;
- The international launch, jointly with the Australian Institute for Commercialisation, of *ExpatriateConnect.com* with Nobel Laureate and former Australian of the Year Professor Peter Doherty, in June 2004; and
- A citizenship filing event at Australia House on 2 July 2007, the first working date for lodging applications under the new *Australian Citizenship Act 2007*.

In October 2003, launches were held for the SCG's book in **Australia**, in Melbourne, Adelaide, Canberra, Brisbane and Sydney.

In the **United States**, the following events have taken place:

- A joint event in New York with the networking organisation formerly known as YAPA (now Advance: Australian Professionals in America) with Professor Hugo as a guest speaker in May 2003;
- A book launch in Washington DC in November 2003;
- A book launch in Chicago in November 2003;
- An event in New York with Consul General Ken Allen to promote *Australian Expats: stories from abroad* in January 2004;
- A combined brainstorming session with the Chicago Chapter of *Advance* as part of preparations for submissions to the Senate's Inquiry into Australian Expatriates in Chicago in February 2004.

In **Canada**, a Citizenship Affirmation Ceremony was held with the then Citizenship Minister Gary Hardgrave in Ottawa in February 2003.

In **Europe**, apart from the UK, the following events have been held:

- An information session in June 2001 in Brussels, Belgium;
- A Saturday-afternoon information seminar in Zurich, Switzerland in March 2003;
- A book launch event in November 2003 (in conjunction with the Australia Society of Belgium), in Brussels;
- A book launch in Geneva in November 2003;
- A book launch in Dublin in January 2004;
- An information seminar for Australians in Berlin in May 2005.

The SCG is very grateful for the assistance and support of many Australian missions in the organisation of its events.

On a number of other occasions, SCG volunteers have been guest speakers at events organised by other groups or organisations in various countries. The SCG is happy to make available a volunteer to speak at functions organised by Australian organisations or clubs that would like to hear more about its work.

How You Can Support the SCG

To date the SCG has met the costs associated with its work largely out of the personal pockets of its volunteers and small donations by those in the Diaspora appreciative of its work. Online credit card donations of up to US\$ 50 can be made using the Amazon Honor System installed on the SCG's website. Donations can also be made offline. For information contact your local SCG volunteer.

Some funds have been generated by the sale of website advertising space and affiliate arrangements with various businesses. If your business or organisation would like to advertise on the SCG's website, or if you'd like to sponsor an SCG event or the SCG's activities in any other way, please write to info@southern-cross-group.org.

Looking Towards the Future

The Southern Cross Group hopes to be able to continue to serve the Australian Diaspora going forward. In 2007-08 it hopes to continue its extensive support work for those eligible to apply for Australian citizenship under the *Australian Citizenship Act 2007* and build awareness of the expatriate disenfranchisement issue in the lead up to the 2007 Australian federal election.

At the same time the SCG plans to put in place new legal and organisational structures so that it will eventually be able to have a full-time secretariat and expand its activities. Fund raising on a larger scale than has happened to date will be a necessary part of securing the Group's future, so that the SCG's growth and development can parallel that of the Australian Diaspora, allowing it to remain a leading advocacy and support organisation in the years to come.

Contacts

The Contact Us pages of the SCG's website provide the details of your nearest SCG volunteer, or send an e-mail to info@southern-cross-group.org.

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