The Southern Cross Group in Belgium

Minutes of the Inaugural Meeting

Held at the premises of Freshfields-Deringer, Bastion Tower on Tuesday 25 January 2000.

Present

John Russell and Anne MacGregor, who had called the meeting and some 35 other people who had responded to the invitation to attend.

Welcome

John Russell welcomed those present. He and Anne MacGregor then explained that the purpose of calling the meeting had been to gauge the interest amongst Australians and New Zealanders living in Belgium, in forming a new group to pursue the need for changes in the law and administrative procedures in those matters that adversely affected them as expatriates.

As evidenced by the number present, he said, there was already a lot of interest in the need for such a group. In all over 70 people had responded to the notice of the meeting, with those unable to attend all asking that they be kept informed of developments.

Initial Issues

By way of illustration of the types of issues that could be of concern to the new group, three short position papers were circulated:

- EU Social Security Legislation and the Rights of Non-EU Nationals
- Bilateral Social Security Agreements
- Dual Citizenship Rights

  The paper on dual citizenship was supported by a copy of a letter sent to The Australian Citizenship Council in March 1999 by a number of Australians living in Belgium. Copies of the Issues Paper "Contemporary Australian Citizenship" released by the Council in February 1999 were also available at the meeting.

(Copies of the MS Word files for the three papers are attached for those who were not present at the meeting).

General Discussion

The meeting was then thrown open for general discussion.

It was evident that there was considerable concern among those present about the three matters raised as initial issues. The range of scenarios indicated by a number of speakers showed that these issues could have far-reaching, and sometimes disastrous, effects on the personal and financial well-being of expatriates. There was general agreement that the issue of dual citizenship was the most pressing and that in many cases the ability to carry dual citizenship could go a long way to clarifying the position of some, but not all, individuals in respect of the other two issues.

A number of speakers raised other issues of concern including the position of children under the Australian citizenship legislation, Belgian work permits, Belgian driving licences, estate law and planning, etc.

It was also clear that similar problems existed for expatriates in many countries other than Belgium. Many considered that non-nationals living in Australia and New Zealand would have, in effect, mirror images of the problems and that such groups may provide good support in pressing governments for resolution of the issues.

Future Directions

There was unanimous agreement that those present should form a new organization to be known tentatively as the Southern Cross Group. John Russell expressed the view that because of the complex nature of the issues already identified and those likely to be identified in the future, the way forward would depend heavily on the continuing input of a good number of technically competent people. He felt that the administrative costs of the new group could be kept to a minimum through the use of e-mail and the Internet. Much of the material on which research could be based is already available on the web sites of government and non-government organizations. A database to maintain contact details of members was under preparation.

Those present who volunteered to assist in the initial setting up of the group were Majella ANNING, Mark BAKER, Julian CARROLL, Dale EMERSON, Graham IRELAND, Anthony JUDGE, Josephine LEE, Anne MacGREGOR, John MacGREGOR, John RUSSELL and Teri VERHAGEN.

In closing the meeting, John Russell invited others who felt, on reflection, that they could also assist, to contact himself or Anne MacGregor.