

## **The grouse of representatives**

Alex Duchon  
Canberra Times  
26 March 2009  
P. 21

These days an Australian traveller landing themselves in trouble overseas might well receive more assistance than they would in similar circumstances at home. An explosion of unrealistic expectations has seen DFAT become, in effect, an overseas branch of Centrelink, providing excessive services to Australians who in many circumstances have failed to fulfil basic reciprocal obligations such as taking out travel insurance.

A serious dilemma now confronts the Government, with a complete mismatch between public expectations and what represents a reasonable level of consular support to Australians abroad. Australians are travelling in huge numbers nearly six million of us travelled overseas last year, double the number 10 years ago a trend driven by cheap fares and globalisation. More of us travel, and we travel to increasingly risky destinations, adventuring in remote places and visiting political hot spots on both business and holiday.

Yet, regardless of location or circumstances, we still expect our Government to bail us out when things go wrong. Overblown expectations are fanned by media interest in sensational foreign tragedies like Britt Laphorne's, but successive governments are also to blame. Media pressure intimidates them into throwing consular resources at high-profile cases. This bids up public expectations of DFAT's ability to come to the rescue. Victims of high-profile international incidents can receive vastly more assistance than others in similar circumstances at home. It's a form of moral hazard: governments, dancing attendance on the media, indirectly encourage travellers to take risks, with the taxpayer picking up the tab.

The department made \$708,000 in emergency loans to 384 Australian travellers in 2007-8, more than twice as much as it lent the year before. Costly medical evacuations of uninsured travellers were a factor. The department also makes many small loans to travellers in financial difficulty, with a recovery rate of less than 50 per cent. The department helps Australians arrested overseas and those in prison. It helps locate missing people overseas, and 1260 Australians in foreign hospitals were assisted last year. In the same 12-month period, the department issued 1165 travel advisories relating to 165 destinations. It manages massive consular crises, evacuating more than 5000 Australians from Lebanon in 2006.

The dilemma is that it does all this while its resources are being relentlessly squeezed by successive governments. The average Australian rarely comes into contact with the consular service and would be hard pressed to describe what it does. "Money for diplomats" is not a big seller at budget time.

Over the past 20 years the number of DFAT's staff overseas has been progressively cut: positions overseas are expensive to maintain and are the first to go in budget cuts. Twenty-one years ago, before Foreign Affairs merged with the Department of Trade, it had 780 overseas staff. Now, in the combined department, there are only 517 a staggering one-third fewer. And these are the people at the coalface of the consular function, those helping people escape from war zones and disaster areas, and help victims of crime like the Laphornes to navigate their way through foreign red tape.

Australian consular staff rarely receive praise: hundreds of media articles reported varying levels of dissatisfaction in the way the department handled the Laphorne case. This was despite the fact that the embassy in Croatia (a small DFAT mission with only two Australia-based staff) provided a dedicated liaison officer and brought in an extra officer from the Paris embassy. The ambassador was involved every day, the Foreign Affairs Minister made representations, the embassy arranged daily police briefings for the family and the AFP sent two liaison officers to Zagreb. The department assisted with the family's travel arrangements and the return of the body, as well as facilitating a second autopsy in Australia. The head of

the consular division at DFAT was then subjected to a grilling over several hours in the Senate about why this level of service wasn't good enough.

In January, holidaymakers in Fiji were stranded by floods. Although the department issued travel warnings, Australians' expectations of assistance (more planes, more help) were apparently not adjusted. One traveller was reported as saying she bought her holiday in full knowledge of the rainy season but authorities had "let her down" by allowing her to fly into it.

There is an easy fix (unlike other wickedly complex problems confronting the Government today). It's a three-step program. One: remind Australians of their own responsibilities when travelling, like registering their travel arrangements with DFAT's online Smartraveller consular assistance service, and taking out travel insurance. Two: educate travellers, and perhaps the media, with regular media campaigns about the services DFAT offers (and those it cannot). Three: create an Australian Consular Service, or at the very least a separate division with its own budget and head, overseen by DFAT, with sole responsibility for the consular function and funded properly so it can meet the reasonable demands of both government and travellers. It's just about budget time and DFAT's funding has been neglected for too long. We can't demand a Rolls-Royce consular service and then balk at the price.

Alex Duchon is a research associate at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, and was on the research team supporting the Institute's Blue Ribbon Panel on the instruments of Australian foreign policy. The panel's report was released last week.