

## **The safety net dragging us down**

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Recently one of Australia's most senior foreign policy officials was asked by a foreign counterpart what issues kept him awake at night - Iraq, East Timor, Indonesia, the rise of China, global warming? The answer was none of these, but rather "looking after Australians overseas". His interlocutor nodded in energetic agreement. "So it is with us also," he replied.

Welcome to the new world of diplomacy. As global citizens seem increasingly to cut themselves loose from national roots to lead cosmopolitan lives, governments around the world - especially governments of advanced countries such as Australia - seem to face ever-rising expectations that they will accept greater and greater responsibility for the safety of their citizens overseas.

In Australia, this trend has been marked by high-profile crises: the evacuation of Australians from Lebanon during the Israel-Hezbollah war; the search for and recovery of Douglas Wood, taken hostage in Iraq; the assistance provided to victims of the Boxing Day tsunami; and the return of Australians wounded and killed after the Bali bombings.

Several factors explain why the burden of consular services has grown in recent years. First there is the simple growth in the numbers of Australians overseas. Since 1997 the number of Australians travelling overseas each year has exceeded 3 million, and this figure has grown by between 5 and 8 per cent a year.

Second, the government has encouraged Australians to look to it for help if they find themselves in trouble overseas, especially since the election of the Howard Government.

Third, and partly as a result of government encouragement, the public's expectations have grown. As the Government has undertaken more and more high-cost, highly publicised consular activities, Australians have come to expect the same levels of support if they find themselves in trouble, and the Government finds itself trapped in a cycle of rising expectations. In the 1996-97 financial year, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade provided some 13,000 Australians with consular assistance. Just seven years later, in 2004, the department helped more than 25,000 Australians in difficulty in more than 152 countries. Two years later, the number of countries in which assistance was required had jumped to 178.

It is a little inconsistent that the Government, which places rhetorical emphasis on self-reliance and deprecates the intrusion of the "nanny state" into the realm of personal responsibility, should have presided over this significant transfer of risk and responsibility from individuals to the state, especially in an area in which the state is often so poorly placed to accept it.

The result is potentially serious for Australia. The number of diplomats, and the proportion of their time, devoted to reporting, analysing and influencing developments in key countries central to Australia's future have fallen sharply in recent years. In countries where Australia has significant interests to protect and promote, the consequences can be serious and long-lasting. Indonesia is a perfect example. Significant consular issues in the past few years - from the Bali bombings to Schapelle Corby - have placed a huge workload on our mission in Jakarta. But at the same time, Indonesia's political system has been transformed by the introduction and evolution of democracy and decentralisation, and our bilateral relationship has been strained by the backwash from East Timor.

If at some time in the next few years we are taken by surprise by some serious upheaval in Jakarta, people will ask what our diplomats were doing when they should have been keeping on top of developments. The answer may be that they were doing consular work.

No one would argue that governments should not help Australians in trouble abroad. But equally it is plain that we need to set some limits on the help that is offered. The Government needs to cap community expectations of the kinds of help it can provide to Australians overseas, and send clearer messages about the need for individuals to take responsibility for their own wellbeing while abroad. Second, the Government needs to ensure the resources devoted to consular work do not detract from the ability of Australia's foreign service to undertake critical diplomatic work. If the department is to promote our chief national interests as well as look after Australians in trouble abroad, it needs more money.

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