

27 July 2022

Peter Shergold AC (Chair)  
Independent Panel, Covid Review

**Via online form** ([www.e61.in/covid-review](http://www.e61.in/covid-review)) **and email** ([covidreview@e61.in](mailto:covidreview@e61.in))

Dear Review Panel members,

### **Submission to the Covid Review**

On behalf of Advance Global Australians, the organisation for the Australian diaspora, thank you for your time conducting this analysis of Australia's handling of the Covid pandemic.

I welcome an opportunity to make this submission on behalf of the Advance community, who make up a significant portion of the Australian diaspora, estimated to number around 1 million citizens prior to the pandemic.

Please contact Johanna Pitman, Advance CEO ([johanna@advance.org](mailto:johanna@advance.org)) should you have any questions regarding the contents of this submission.

Yours sincerely,



**Andrew Low FAICD F FIN**  
Chair, Advance Global Australians

National Chairman, Australian British Chamber of Commerce  
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Chairman, Cobden Reid  
Non-exec Chairman, PRP Diagnostic Imaging  
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## SUMMARY

The pandemic had a significant impact on expatriate Australians, including the emotional and financial toll as a result of border closures, the lack of quarantine facilities, and the underlying “anti-expat” and insular sentiment that emerged. There was further distress caused by the lack of understanding around expat circumstances.

To better prepare for future international crises and health emergencies, unified decision-making and consistency in crisis management processes needs to be prioritised. Specifically, Australia’s consular services should be reviewed, and collaboration with citizen-initiated websites and Australian community representatives overseas should be encouraged to improve two-way communication with expats.

Advance recommends that the development of a diaspora policy could be the mechanism to address these issues, deliver broad benefits for Australia, and rebuild goodwill with Australians overseas.

### **Who we are**

Advance Global Australians (“Advance”) links expatriate Australians with Australia. We shine a spotlight on their achievements and support them in their endeavours, wherever they are along the international career lifecycle. Advance is an integral part of Australian ‘soft power’ abroad. By harnessing the potential of global Australians and keeping them connected with Australia, Advance ensures their talent and ideas will flow back into Australia.

### **Purpose of submission**

Advance is making a submission to recognise the impact of Australia’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic for overseas Australians and their families, particularly as a result of border closures and related rules. The submission aims to be constructive and forward-looking, to collectively express the views and experience of many overseas Australians, and to recommend actions for the government to be better prepared for future crises.

### **Collation of input**

This submission draws on a wide range of sources to capture and convey the sentiment of overseas Australians regarding the government’s handling of Covid-19. Sources include:

- The [2020](#) and [2021 Survey of Global Australians](#), which included specific questions related to the pandemic
- A questionnaire of Advance members distributed in [June 2022](#), encouraging personal anecdotes and other recommendations for government action now and in the future.
- A deep dive into Facebook groups such as [Aussie Expats Coming Home](#)
- Secondary sources such as news articles, scholarly articles, international studies and government reports.

## QUESTION 1: What impact did the pandemic have on the Advance community?

1. Overseas Australians endured significant **emotional and financial hardship** as a result of border closures and the lack of quarantine facilities
2. Overseas Australians and recently returned expats experienced an **underlying “anti-expat” and insular sentiment**
3. Delays in ending the border restrictions once vaccinations were available caused **further distress and disillusionment**

Expats were unable to return home for important family events, such as weddings, milestone birthdays, and even funerals. For those living overseas, these events are extra important as a means of staying in touch with home and family. Examples of those unable to reach home were occasionally publicised (e.g. [James Turbitt](#), a Belgium resident who had to say goodbye to his dying mother on a video call) and often attributed to state border closures. But many more overseas Australians were unable to contemplate the complexity and cost of returning home.

While the restrictions through 2020 were broadly accepted or tolerated by overseas Australians, the continued border closures, limited quarantine facilities, and significant testing hurdles for fully vaccinated passengers arriving into Australia in 2021 was perceived as particularly harsh. In addition, constructive and practical advice to improve the processes for returning Australians was not acknowledged and appeared to be ignored.<sup>1</sup>

*“I now realise that Australia hates its expats. That’s become clear these last two years.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“I was shocked and saddened that most Australians simply accepted (and even encouraged) the total border closure into Australia.”*

*“The most difficult part of returning home was not packing up my 20-years of life in Boston, selling our house, and changing schools... It was navigating the quarantine requirements, and getting a negative COVID test that complied with multiple conflicting rules.”*

<sup>1</sup> See for example: Lucy Morell, [Submission 516](#) to the [Senate Select Committee on COVID-19](#), September 2020; or a letter by Aussie Expats Coming Home alerting authorities to Australian businesses selling fraudulent vaccination records, which was unacknowledged by 11 of 12 recipients.

<sup>2</sup> Expat quotes are drawn from the open-ended responses in the [2020](#) and [2021 Survey of Global Australians](#), a [questionnaire](#) of Advance members distributed in June 2022, and the [Aussie Expats Coming Home](#) Facebook group.

*"I am still coming to terms with the fact that Australia closed its borders to Australian passport holders."*

*"Australia's fortress approach was a shock. And not letting Aussies leave was a shock."*

*"Australia's treatment of foreign students, backpackers, tourists and business travelers during the pandemic appeared unnecessarily xenophobic and hostile, adding to the stress on expats. A more reasonable and compassionate policy should be planned for the next pandemic."*

*"Deny[ing] up to one million Australians who live and work overseas their privilege as citizens to "re-enter Australia freely" served to protect lives in Australia in the pre-vaccination era. Many Australians overseas could understand that sacrificing this privilege was for the greater good. But the sense of alienation this policy wrought endures and rankles in the mass vaccination era.*

- [Jenny Hayward-Jones](#), Lowy Institute Series

### STATISTICS<sup>3</sup>

- **37%** of those that have returned home had to significantly delay or postpone their return to Australia.
- **48%** of those that have not returned home listed the reason as border closures.
- **29%** experienced personal hardship, anguish and frustration due to the strict border policies.

*The burden of Australia's Covid response has been borne most heavily by our expatriates and our immigrants. Australia has always had a large diaspora, out there conquering the world. But the debate about Australians abroad has soured.*

*Australia has severely restricted the rights of its people to both leave and return to the country. Tens of thousands of Australians remain stranded overseas. And there has been a small-minded and mean tone to the public discussion about our expatriates.*

- [Dr Michael Fullilove](#)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> [2021 Advance Survey of Global Australians](#), p. 10

<sup>4</sup> Dr Michael Fullilove AM, Executive Director, Lowy Institute. [Fortress Australia is a smaller Australia](#)

## QUESTION 2: What worked well, and didn't, in the government policy response to reduce the impact of the pandemic?

Two key shortcomings in the government policy response have been explored via other enquiries, such as the Senate Select Committee on Covid-19.

1. The border closures and **lack of suitable quarantine facilities**
2. Frequent changes to **testing and documentation requirements**

Additional “missed opportunities” and negative rhetoric further undermined the government policy response.

3. Limited use of **technology and crowdsourcing** of information to determine the number of people seeking to enter Australia
  - a. The official consular form to register individuals who wanted to return home failed to gather information about the bulk of overseas Australians who did not consider themselves “vulnerable” but would travel to Australia if it was more affordable.
  - b. By contrast, the website created by Dutch Australian, Pieter Den Heten, [removethecap.com](http://removethecap.com), quickly identified the location and number of expats looking to travel home.
  - c. Facebook groups, such as @AussieExpatsComingHome, which has over 10,000 members, became a trusted source of up-to-date information about quarantine processes and how to prepare for the experience (especially for families); tips to complete Covid testing requirements and navigate changing interstate travel rules.
4. Insufficient coordination with **trusted organisations on the ground** to support overseas Australians
  - a. Information for and about overseas Australians was only available via government websites and consular offices. As a result, the consular offices became overwhelmed and could not handle the volume of incoming enquiries.
  - b. While this may have made sense initially for dissemination of important information, as time continued, the government should have leveraged community-connected organisations, such as Advance, Australian Chambers of Commerce and Australian clubs who could disseminate information, and relay any emerging issues amongst overseas Australians<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Other organisations that mobilised/expanded to support Australians through the pandemic include the [Stranded Aussies Abroad Network](#), [Alliance of Australians Abroad](#) and [The Southern Cross Group](#)

*“I don't think any of the policy responses were based on a reasoning of scientific research vs community needs (including economics).”*

*“I've continued to fulfil all my obligations as an Australian Citizen - I pay taxes in Australia and vote in every State and Federal election. The one and only time in 20 years abroad that I reached out to my local Consulate due to a time-critical life or death situation, after doing everything by the book and registering with DFAT months prior, there was no response to registration, email, message, phone nor in person.”*

*“Requiring testing on time limits that could not work with available testing sites - 24 hours is too short a turn-around for testing results to be delivered in many cases”*

*“I think the most shocking thing from an outsider's perspective was the conflict between the states and lack of a national solution.”*

#### 5. Limited acknowledgement of **expat circumstances and depth of local ties.**

- a. The expectation that expats would relocate to Australia during the first few months of the pandemic failed to acknowledge that around 30% of overseas Australians have been abroad for over 20 years<sup>6</sup>, and a further 36% have lived overseas more than 10 years.
- b. For the vast majority of overseas Australians, their primary (and likely only) residence is overseas. They have an established job or business overseas, and likely have children in local schools overseas. For most, any return to Australia would need to coincide with the end of a scholastic year, and/or allow time to exit a lease and/or sell property.
- c. In normal times, the process of packing up is expensive and time-consuming, but the added cost and complexity of navigating border restrictions made it prohibitive for many to return home while quarantine requirements existed.

*“There are just so many steps to get back, and every single one has to go perfectly or we're stuck homeless and without income with our two young kids. The High Commission is being very empathetic but has bluntly said not to count on them for any practical help. So all we can do is hope that every single PCR test is negative, every connecting flight is on time, and every border lets us through. It's totally nerve-wracking.”*

*“The difficulty of repatriation is underestimated, but the nastiness just takes it to another level.”*

<sup>6</sup> [2021 Advance Survey of Global Australians](#), p. 10

*“As an expat, I felt alienated and cast aside by the Australian community.”*

*“The lack of meaningful arrangements to allow Australians to return made it clear that Australians overseas were not a priority for the Australian government.”*

*“The closer my flight gets, the more anxious I am. I haven’t been sleeping well for months and I feel like I’ve aged a lot. I’m just trying to do one thing at a time which is hard when trying to pack up your life, ensure everything is done that I need to get done as well as study for my exams. Sleeping tablets are helping me get and stay asleep, even though I don’t like taking them.”*

6. Unsympathetic messaging and frequent rule changes had **broader negative consequences**

- a. The language used to justify closing the border exacerbated **nationalist tendencies**, including scepticism that arriving Australians were responsible for bringing in infection, or should have returned earlier.
- b. The imposition of a [criminal penalty](#) for Australian citizens trying to return home from India implied a difference between the 9000 Australian citizens who remained in India and Australian citizens elsewhere.
- c. The demographic shock of the [temporary freeze on inward migration](#) during the pandemic, will have implications for both our population and economy.
- d. The constant changes to state and federal border rules and testing requirements was particularly stressful for individuals visiting Australia to sick or dying relatives, and for those who were returning home permanently.

*“As other developed countries re-open, Australia — an open-minded nation of immigrants and travellers, with a long-held belief in globalisation — remains closed to the world.”*

*“We also seem to have forgotten the advantages of immigration. Properly managed, immigration is nation-building. It grows our economy; it makes us more demographically vigorous; it thickens our connections to the countries around us; it brings in imagination and ambition. The qualities of the immigrant are highly correlated to the qualities of the entrepreneur.”*

- Dr Michael Fullilove<sup>7</sup>

*“[The Federal Government’s] lengthy fixation on closed borders has left Australia sharply off the pace in regional diplomacy, precisely when rivals like Beijing have had all shoulders to the wheel.”*

- Richard McGregor<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Dr Michael Fullilove AM, Executive Director, Lowy Institute. [Fortress Australia is a smaller Australia](#)

<sup>8</sup> Richard McGregor, [China gains from Australia's interrupted diplomacy - Lowy Institute](#); [Overcoming the Covid winner's curse](#)

### QUESTION 3: What should be done now to better prepare for the next health crisis?

Advance supports the relevant recommendations of the [Senate Select Committee on COVID-19](#) under Recommendation 2 of the [final report](#):

1. Agreement on **national principles for quarantine**, including responsibility for provision of suitable facilities and for funding, management and compliance;
2. A plan for management of future international **border closures**;
3. A plan for timely **repatriation of Australians overseas** in the event of border closures or restricted international travel.

In addition, the following actions should be taken:

4. Review **crisis management processes** to prioritise unified decision-making and consistency in government guidelines<sup>9</sup>:
  - Acknowledge that politicisation of a crisis damages Australia's reputation in the world, and the best outcomes for its citizens overseas and at home.
  - Prioritise unified decision-making, across levels of government
  - Deliver consistency with limited changes where possible in government guidelines.
5. Review Australia's provision of **consular services** to ensure adequate levels of assistance to Australians during international emergencies
  - While all posts might have been overwhelmed by the number of enquiries, the lack of information, and inability to answer phone calls or respond to enquiries, particularly observed in the USA and parts of Europe, escalated the anxiety and frustration of Australians overseas.
  - The United Nations affirms that consular assistance is a right<sup>10</sup>; however there is no reference to a right of an Australian to receive certain levels of assistance in the [consular services charter](#). In fact, Australians abroad are reminded that they "don't have a legal right to consular assistance and shouldn't assume assistance will be provided."

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<sup>9</sup> See [pandemic responses](#) from Taiwan (epidemiologically consistent) and Canada (fewer federal-provincial disputes with clearer public messaging).

<sup>10</sup> Consular assistance is the aid provided by the consular or diplomatic agents of a State to its nationals abroad. Access to consular assistance is classified as "customary law foundations of international migration law". In the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), States recognized the importance of consular assistance in better safeguarding the rights and interests of all migrants at all times by committing to enhancing "consular protection, assistance and cooperation throughout the migration cycle". UN General Assembly, The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), adopted on 11 January 2019, U.N. Doc. A/RES/73/195, Objective 14.



- The world's best use cases for consular services<sup>11</sup> have been codified and consolidated in legislation, while in others they arise from multiple laws. Some countries provide financial assistance (in the form of loans) for repatriation.
6. Enable and encourage **collaboration with citizen-initiated websites** during international emergencies.
    - See item 3 under Question 2
  7. Develop a mechanism to **brief and hear from Australian community representatives** overseas for two-way communication.
    - See item 4 under Question 2

*“Whilst the Australian Government maintains extraterritorial power to govern us while we’re living abroad and readily exploits our expertise, expatriates have long assumed that it was also reciprocated in citizen protection - it’s been tested and profoundly impacted Australians abroad who will never forget going forward that it’s one-sided.”*

*“Create purpose-built quarantine facilities near each major airport (rather than placing expats in solitary confinement in stuffy hotel rooms for 14 days).”*

*“It was extremely frustrating to see other nations organising repatriation flights while Australians were left in limbo.”*

*“The fundamental right of all Australian citizens to be able to leave and enter their own country should be put into law.”*

*“Relationships with other countries (not just diaspora) need much more work. Borders are part of the problem, not the solution. We’re on the same planet whether we like it or not, and environmental and health issues are global (as is trade, of course).”*

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<sup>11</sup> [International comparison of consular services | RAND](#)

## QUESTION 4: What other issues would you like to raise with the panel?

The need for Australia to develop and adopt a **diaspora policy** has been raised since 2003.<sup>12</sup> In the aftermath of the pandemic, and particularly with a change of Federal leadership, a concerted effort to develop a diaspora policy would help rebuild relations with overseas Australians and address multiple issues raised by expats over the last two decades. These issues send a negative signal about the value of expats to Australia, yet are well within the decision-making control of the government.

A diaspora policy could:

- 1) Categorise and quantify (where possible) the value for Australia derived from overseas Australians
- 2) Provide an audit of addressable challenges / inefficiencies faced by expatriates
- 3) Activate initiatives to resolve those issues

Short-term wins and progress towards long-term benefits for Australia could be achieved by investigating topics such as:

- **Logistical issues** such as making it easier to access Australian government services when overseas or when returning to Australia:
  - Accessing MyGov without an Australian mobile number
  - Maintain or renew a Medicare card when overseas
  - Extend voting rights by making it easier to vote in major global cities<sup>13</sup>, and extending the number of years that an individual remains on the electoral roll and is eligible to vote
  - Provide “proof of return” for expats that are seeking to demonstrate they will live in a certain suburb for the purpose of enrolling a child in a certain school zone.
  - Enable adult children living overseas with responsibilities for aging parents to complete paperwork for those parents ONLINE.
- **Taxation and financial issues** such as the tax treatment for non-residents
- **Statistics** relating to overseas Australians, their location, skills and value to Australia
- **Employment barriers** for those with international experience and skills

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<sup>12</sup> Professor Andrew Rosser, [Failing to Engage: The Politics of Diaspora Policy in Australia | Melbourne Asia Review](#), November 2021; see also [A good idea gone nowhere? Diaspora policy in Australia | The Interpreter](#).

<sup>13</sup> While likely unrelated, a decision by the AEC to reduce overseas polling booths before the Federal election in May 2022 was perceived as further evidence of the lack of regard for overseas Australians. See also: [The voting rights of Expatriate Australians](#)

Advance is well-positioned to contribute to the development of a diaspora policy, and can suggest other parties to involve and consult. Advance has relations with other diaspora organisations, and has monitored trends and examples of global diaspora policies.

**Table 1: Overview of diaspora engagement in OECD countries<sup>14</sup>**

Country	Diaspora Policy	Diaspora Organisation	Country	Diaspora Policy	Diaspora Organisation
Australia	No	Yes	Japan	No	No
Austria	Yes	Yes	Korea	Yes	Yes
Belgium	Yes	No	Latvia	Yes	Yes
Canada	No	Yes	Lithuania	Yes	Yes
Chile	No	No	Luxembourg	No	No
Colombia	No	Yes	Mexico	Yes	Yes
Costa Rica	No	Yes	Netherlands	Yes	No
Czech Republic	Yes	No	New Zealand	No	Yes
Denmark	No	Yes	Norway	N/A	Yes
Estonia	Yes	No	Poland	Yes	Yes
Finland	No	No	Portugal	Yes	Yes
France	Yes	Yes	Slovak Republic	Yes	Yes
Germany	No	No	Slovenia	Yes	Yes
Greece	Yes	Yes	Spain	Yes	Yes
Hungary	Yes	Yes	Sweden	No	Yes
Iceland	No	No	Switzerland	No	Yes
Ireland	Yes	Yes	Turkey	Yes	Yes
Israel	Yes	Yes	United Kingdom	No	No
Italy	Yes	Yes	United States	No	Yes

<sup>14</sup> A more detailed listing of diaspora policies and organisations [here](#). Source: Internal research.