

## NEWS



GLOBAL STOCKTAKE: *Concerns about diplomatic under-representation*

## Diplomatic audit

**T**he work of Australia's international diplomatic missions will be examined by a new inquiry into Australia's overseas representation.

The inquiry by federal parliament's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee will review the location, staffing and activities of Australia's diplomatic missions, including the use of technology to conduct diplomatic work.

"The use of new technologies offers a range of possibilities and has the potential to enhance Australia's footprint and diplomatic impact in a cost effective manner," said Foreign Affairs subcommittee chair Nick Champion (Wakefield, SA).

While the committee will review ways to improve Australia's virtual diplomatic reach, some experts are concerned about Australia's physical diplomatic presence overseas.

International relations expert Dr Paul Monk told an earlier committee review that Australia's representation overseas is facing "severe incapacitation" due to a relative decline in funding.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is responsible for running and staffing 89 embassies, high commissions, consulates-general and multilateral missions around the world.

This is less than all but four of the 34 member nations of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the members of which average 150 missions.

"Being part of the quite powerful networks associated with the United States and Britain would have led me to think that Australia should have stronger representation rather than being down along with Slovakia and Luxembourg," Dr Monk said.

A research fellow at the Lowy Institute, Alexandra Oliver, has also shared concerns about Australia's diminishing diplomatic representation with the Foreign Affairs subcommittee.

"The glaring example there is India, where we maintain one post in Delhi. In Latin America we have opened a new post in Lima in the last couple of years but we still maintain only five in Latin America."

Mr Champion said increasing Australia's representation overseas would be examined in the context of previous inquiries into Australia's relationship with Africa and a review of the DFAT annual report 2009–10.

"While the committee recommended in the Africa report that Australia's diplomatic representation in Africa be increased, it recognised that a broader review of overseas representation was needed."

Mr Champion said the new inquiry will enable the committee to examine these issues in greater depth. •

### LINKS

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### ACCESS TO HUNGARIAN BENEFITS

An agreement between Australia and Hungary to make social security benefits available for 5,000 former Hungarians now living in Australia has won approval from federal parliament's Treaties Committee.

The agreement is one of a number of social security agreements Australia has negotiated with Eastern European countries, from which Australia accepted a significant number of refugees in the decades following World War II.

"The agreement provides access to Hungarian age, disability or survivor's benefit for the estimated 5,000 Australians of Hungarian descent who have an entitlement to any of these benefits," committee deputy chair Senator Simon Birmingham (SA) said.

"The agreement will also mean that people who move between Australia and Hungary during their working life will have their entitlements recognised by both countries."

So far Australia has negotiated 26 social security agreements with other countries, which is important for a multicultural nation with nearly a quarter of its population born overseas and 40 per cent of its aged population also hailing from overseas. The agreements overcome barriers to pension payments, such as citizenship requirements, minimum contribution periods and current country of residence.

Peter Hutchinson from the International Branch of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs told the committee there are almost 23,000 Hungarian-born people living in Australia.

This proposed shared responsibility agreement is aimed at addressing gaps in social security coverage for people who have moved between Australia and Hungary. •

### LINKS

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