



THINKSTOCK

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH: *Call for better diplomatic representation*

Diplomatic focus needs to shift

Economic growth centres require attention.

Australia's diplomatic network is underfunded, overworked and unable to respond to the challenges of the current global environment, according to international policy think tank the Lowy Institute.

In a report titled *Diplomatic disrepair*, Lowy found Australia had the fewest diplomatic posts of any member of the G20 group of nations, and spent less than \$1 billion annually on diplomacy compared to around \$25 billion on defence.

It called for Australia to open at least another 20 new missions over the next decade, following on from recently opened posts in Peru, Ethiopia and India.

Co-author of the Lowy report Andrew Shearer said the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has been consistently run down in terms of funding and staffing by successive governments over the last 20 years. This is despite DFAT's crucial role in navigating a turbulent international political environment as well as rapidly growing demand for consular services.

"When you add all that up I am absolutely convinced that now is not the time for Australia to be running down the instruments available to government to protect our interests internationally," Mr Shearer said.

"And yet the work that we've done over the last several years I think makes a

very strong case that is exactly what we've been doing."

Federal parliament's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee recently launched an inquiry into Australia's overseas representation. Foreign Affairs Subcommittee Chair Nick Champion (Wakefield, SA) said the new inquiry was established out of concerns raised during a previous inquiry into Australia's representation in Africa and the review of DFAT's 2009-10 annual report.

"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.

"In the review of the annual report the committee expressed the view that there was a substantial question in relation to DFAT's future role and the adequacy of the services it provides on behalf of Australia."

Mr Shearer said the new inquiry needs to provide a recasting of Australia's diplomatic focus, which he says is overly directed towards established economies in Europe.

"New posts are needed in emerging centres of influence and economic opportunity, particularly inland China and eastern Indonesia," Mr Shearer said. "The Gulf, Latin America and Central Asia are also priorities."

Mr Shearer warned there could be severe consequences if the inquiry does not produce an ongoing funding boost for DFAT and a bipartisan commitment to increase Australia's diplomatic capacity over the next decade and beyond.

"Diplomacy is the most cost-effective policy instrument to promote and secure our interests in a fast-changing world. Our overseas network has been neglected and run down over decades.

"In an era of increased risk, time may be running out for government to reverse this trend and to take meaningful, sustained action to rebuild Australia's diplomatic infrastructure." •

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