

## NEWS

# Diplomatic network needs overhaul

## More diplomatic posts recommended.

**A**ustralia's diplomatic network is in urgent need of an overhaul, including a bigger budget, increased overseas posts and better use of new technologies, a parliamentary inquiry has found.

Criticisms of Australia's existing representation overseas are contained in a report released by federal parliament's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee, which described the network as "seriously deficient".

Chair of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee, Nick Champion (Wakefield, SA) said Australia needs to rebuild its diplomatic representation and has called for an increase in the number of posts around the world by at least another 20.

To do this the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) would need a significant budget increase, with the committee describing the department as being chronically underfunded over the past three decades.

"Australia has the smallest diplomatic network of the G20 countries and sits at 25th in comparison to the 34 nations of the OECD. Australia is clearly punching below its weight," Mr Champion said.

"DFAT has experienced cuts and financial constraints through successive governments and this has resulted in a diplomatic network which is seriously deficient and does not reflect Australia's position within the G20 and OECD economies."

The committee has recommended Australia increase its representation throughout north and central Asia, particularly in China. It also said deepening our relationship with Indonesia by opening a post in Surabaya should be a priority.

The review's focus on Asia complements the federal government's white paper on the increasing importance of Australia's relationship with the region.

While the focus of the report is on opening new posts it has also noted that the decision to close posts should be subject to more parliamentary scrutiny.

The report has also recommended that travellers pay an extra fee to help cover the ever-increasing costs associated with consular assistance provided to Australians in trouble overseas. Recent high-profile cases include Australian lawyer Melinda Taylor, who was detained in Libya.

An estimated 7 million Australians travel each year, and around 1,000 will end up being arrested.

The committee has recommended that the additional costs of consular assistance be met through an extra passport fee or small levy which would be tiered to take into account whether or not a traveller has insurance, or whether they cannot obtain cover.

The report has also focused on how DFAT can make better use of social media and new technologies. It has called for an overhaul of the department's websites to make them more user-friendly and the establishment of an office of e-diplomacy.

The committee has also recommended that these issues be further investigated through a white paper and external review. •

### LINKS

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ON OUR OWN: More diplomatic posts needed in Asia



CRUDE SOLUTIONS: Australia's oil refineries under threat

## OIL REFINERIES AT CROSSROADS

In the face of looming closures of two oil refineries in Sydney, the House of Representatives Economics Committee has launched an inquiry into the state of Australia's oil refinery industry.

The planned closures of Shell's Clyde and Caltex's Kurnell oil refineries will leave Australia with only five domestic oil refineries by the end of 2014. Those NSW facilities will be converted into import terminals.

According to Australian Institute of Petroleum figures, in 2010–11 domestic refineries supplied around 74 per cent of petroleum products required by Australia's major industries and service stations. More than a quarter of total petroleum product consumed was imported, primarily from Singapore.

Recent refinery closures have been attributed to the rise of huge refineries in the Asian region such as in Singapore, where a surge of new capacity has depressed profit margins for the Australian industry. The profits of Australia's refineries have declined for several years, mainly due to Asian competition and the high cost of importing and refining crude oil in Australia.

It is becoming more cost effective for oil companies to import refined fuel from Asian mega-refineries, such as Reliance Industry's Jamnagar refinery or ExxonMobil's and Shell's Singapore refineries.

In light of these changes, committee chair Julie Owens (Parramatta, NSW) said it was timely for the committee to examine Australia's domestic refinery capacity, and potential impacts of declining capacity on the economy, energy security and employment.

The committee will identify the current international and domestic trends and pressures impacting on the competitiveness of Australia's domestic oil refineries, and will investigate the likely impact of declining refinery capacity in Australia.

The committee will also consider any potential issues for Australia's future energy security from possible further closures of oil refinery capacity and look at the implications of refinery closures on their workforce.

According to an Australian Strategic Policy Institute report, the fact that domestic oil refining capacity falls short of local demand means Australia is already vulnerable to any future disruption of supplies of imported petroleum during times of crisis. ●

#### LINKS

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AAPONE



**LIFETIME DAMAGE:** More education needed to cut FASD

## Action plan launched on baby alcohol disorders

### Community awareness campaigns needed.

Community leaders and health workers have urged parliament to take action to prevent more children being born with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD).

The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) launched the *Australian Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Action Plan 2013-16* at Parliament House, presenting the plan to members of the House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee, which has been inquiring into the incidence and prevention of FASD.

Brain damage caused by exposure to alcohol in the womb can lead to a range of disorders including poor memory, impaired language skills, poor impulse control and mental, social and emotional delays.

FARE's plan has called for community awareness campaigns about the dangers of alcohol during pregnancy; improved diagnostic capabilities; support for people with FASD to achieve their full potentials; improved data collection on the extent of FASD in Australia; and closing the gap on the higher prevalence of FASD among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

These recommendations were highlighted through a documentary about a young boy, Tristan, who lives with FASD at Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia.

Bunuba community leader and chief executive of the Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre at Fitzroy Crossing, June Oscar said Tristan was one of many children and adults living in her community with special needs because they were exposed to alcohol before they were born.

She said since the community had started to focus on the issue, people were better educated about how to recognise FASD and how to prevent it.

"I'd like to think that our community is now much more informed. People are now sharing in discussions on this issue," Ms Oscar said. "Young people are advising each other that it's harmful to drink during pregnancy, so there is hope.

"I am very optimistic that we'll reach a point where everyone knows about this and everyone can understand those who have been exposed to alcohol in utero.

"The conditions people with FASD have throughout their lives are not just because they want to behave badly or they're doing for the heck of it – it's a condition that they have no control