

PASSPORTS: A HIGH-TECH ACHIEVEMENT FOR AUSTRALIA

Speech by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Gareth Evans, to open the new Sydney Passports Office, 8 March 1991.

Like most good news, the progress we have made in developing what may be the best passport system in the world doesn't get the press it deserves. But the progress has been remarkable, as some of you here today will fully appreciate. There may even be those among you who remember when acquiring an Australian passport took longer than the boat trip to London itself. Even as recently as six years ago, people applying for passports in Sydney had to wait up to three and a half hours to be served. The queues extended into Chifley Square, and became a regular stand-by for the media looking for scenes of frustration and annoyance on a quiet news day.

The media also highlighted the security deficiencies of the Australian passport system. Two separate Royal Commissions into drugs drew attention to the ease with which criminals could either obtain false passports or falsify those already issued. Indeed, the Stewart Royal Commission was sufficiently concerned about such activities to produce a special report on passports in May 1982.

Since that time, the Australian passport system has changed beyond recognition. Our passports are now among the most secure in the world, and accessibility and waiting times have improved enormously. People can now apply for a passport at any Australian Post Office; waiting times at Passports Offices are no longer three and a half hours but less than twenty minutes; and applications are turned around not in six weeks but in less than six days in most cases.

Moreover, these advances have been achieved in parallel with substantial reductions in staff numbers. In the Sydney office, for instance, there are some 10 percent fewer staff than in 1982, but there has been a considerable increase in the number of passports issued. The overall increase in productivity in Sydney is about 50 percent and a similar trend has been evident in our other offices Australia wide. That would not have been possible without the innovative thinking, dedication and sheer hard work that public servants have put in - both in the policy and development area and at the shop-front.

In the last year or two, Australia has moved to the cutting edge of world passports technology with the development of the graphically named DAWN system which uses state-of-the-art laser printing on the back of secure laminate. The novel feature of the laser printing is that it includes the photograph and the signature of the bearer, which makes it

virtually impossible to tamper with an Australian passport. DAWN passports are also machine readable, but with a success rate very much higher than that achieved by any other passports technology that we know of.

The DAWN process is being gradually introduced into Australian passport offices. I very much hope that the next stage of DAWN, which is the introduction of colour laser imaging and therefore colour photographs of the bearer, will soon be perfected and introduced.

Project DAWN is an improvement on any existing passport system in the world, and it is no exaggeration to claim that Australia has been a technology leader in this area. We intend to keep that edge by continuing to look for innovative passport ideas and by trying to further speed up the issuing of passports and simplifying renewal procedures.

Passports are not only travel documents; they also demonstrate entitlement to consular assistance from Australian diplomatic and consular posts overseas. That may sound unexceptionable enough; but in fact the importance of holding an Australian passport was brought home to us very directly by the Gulf crisis. As you all remember, for four months after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a large number of people were held hostage in Iraq and Kuwait. Several of those people who regarded themselves as Australians turned out not to be eligible for consular assistance from the Australian government - at least under existing international practice. They fell into two categories. Either they were dual nationals travelling on their other passport or they were permanent residents of Australia who had never taken out Australian citizenship.

Dual nationality, particularly in a migrant accepting country like Australia, can be an enormous benefit for people and can be a strong psychological link with the country of origin. Equally, though, it can cause travellers enormous difficulties. Most obviously, when a traveller declares his or her nationality by using the passport of another country, the Australian Government has its work cut out for it in trying to establish its credentials - its locus standi - to offer the person consular assistance.

The issues are more clear cut for people who, when eligible, have not chosen, have not bothered, or have not known that they needed, to acquire Australian citizenship. Their failure to do so would generally preclude their entitlement to Australian consular assistance. Whether they see themselves as Australians, whether they have indisputable Australian accents, and whether they live in Australia, are not the issues. What is important is their citizenship and the passport they are using.

Having said that, I must point out that during the hostage crisis, the government decided to

help, to the maximum extent possible, people who did identify themselves closely with Australia. Strictly speaking, we did not have international law on our side in all cases, but my Department and our staff at the Embassy in Baghdad provided a great deal of support and assistance to many theoretically ineligible people. But more could have been done, more quickly and with fewer risks of having our locus standi challenged, if they had been Australians travelling on Australian passports.

Those of you in the travel industry could usefully spread that message more widely. People should be aware of the importance of the passport they hold. It not only gets them across frontiers but also provides a basis for Australian consular assistance.

The second aspect of the Gulf conflict that I want to mention briefly is that of travel advisories. As many of you know, travel advisories are disseminated as press releases by my Department. They highlight problems and difficulties that Australian travellers may encounter in particular countries throughout the world. They usually supplement information already available publicly and have, in the past, covered epidemics, natural disasters, civil disturbances and wars - a wide range of potential difficulties for travellers. It is, of course, for individuals to determine their own response to such advisories. Clearly the business traveller might respond to a travel advice differently from the casual tourist.

It is clear that travel advisories have quite significant consequences for very many people - not only for the individual travellers who must make the decision about whether to travel or not, but for the businesses involved in the travel industry, and indeed for the countries of destination themselves. To alert the public to a real security threat, as we did some weeks ago in Thailand, or to advise Australians not to travel, may lead to a substantial response from the travelling public. People may be more inclined to stay at home, so adding to this year's slump in international travel.

I want to assure you that when we develop travel advisories we are acutely aware of their likely effect. It is true that in the short term, the travel industry could very well suffer a down-turn in business. But you will be aware that we issue such advisories relatively infrequently; and I have no doubt that you appreciate the responsibility we as a government have for alerting Australians to issues which could bear on their safety and welfare. And in the longer term, the industry as a whole stands to benefit from an atmosphere in which the travelling public can have confidence in the advice it is getting from the government. Without that confidence, the public could very well be more dubious about travel in times of international tension.

Finally, as a tangible demonstration of our high-technology passport system, I am very pleased to have here today a special passport. It is fully laser printed, with an easy-to-remember number - K two million. It is not the two millionth passport to be issued by the Australian Government, but I understand the number was reserved to be issued on a

special occasion such as today's opening. So, with the presentation of this passport to Mrs Jean Brook, who was randomly selected from a number of Australians applying for passports over the past few weeks, I declare this new Sydney Passports Office open and wish Mrs Brook a safe and pleasant journey to Switzerland and the UK.

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