



AUSTRALIAN HIGH COMMISSION

PRETORIA

Presentation at the Australian Heads of Mission in Africa panel discussion at the Africa DownUnder Conference

**PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA
Thursday 3 September 2009**

Remarks by Her Excellency Ms Ann Harrap

Australian High Commissioner to South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique and Namibia; High Commissioner-Designate to Lesotho and Swaziland; and Ambassador-Designate to Angola

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.

I think the government has the toughest gig of the day having to do a presentation after a fairly intense day of presentations and at Happy Hour time, so we'll try and make our comments as targeted as possible. We also remain happy for you to approach us at any time during the conference, as the minister suggested you should.

Most of you heard Minister Smith this morning so I won't repeat his messages other than to recall his lament as Australia's past neglect of Africa and to reiterate the very strong commitment of the current Australian government to significantly enhance engagement with Africa – both the continent as a whole through the African Union and the constituent countries.

The Minister mentioned some of the ways in which the government is growing engagement:

- through enhancing our political level engagement (he recounted his attendance at the African Union summit in Addis Ababa in January this year, the Governor-General's visit to Africa in March; the visits to Australia by four African foreign ministers already this year; and African ministerial participation in forums such as this);
- through significant growth in our developmental assistance program – over 40% in the last year;
- and through re-building our relationships with business, so as to grow Australia's commercial and business footprint in Africa

It's the last point I want to focus on today. How can we, as High Commissioners and Ambassadors, work more closely with you to advance Australia's interests in Africa?

I like to describe our role using the 3 A's model.

1. Advice

Given our contacts and our presence in the region, we're able to give you a sense of the broad political and economic trends in our countries of accreditation. For example, people have been asking me about the likely direction of the new Zuma Presidency in South Africa. And that's advice that we're happy to provide.

What we, as Heads of Mission, can't do is give you is very detailed sector specific information and analysis. We don't have the resources to undertake that sort of intensive, almost due diligence, research work. Austrade may be in a position to provide that to you on a fee-for-service basis, but the Australian missions overseas are not. What we can do is provide advice about broad political and economic trends.

2. Advocacy

In a way, HOMs are the marketers and the public relations consultants for the country. We advocate Australian policy models, where relevant, to our host countries. We tell the story of Australia's economic growth and we describe the character and strength of Australian companies doing business overseas. We do that with our contacts and in public forums.

We also advocate specific industry wide issues of concern on market access or barriers to trade. For example in Mozambique, there has been a problem with the issue of work permits to expatriates which has impacted on Australian and other business interests. So we've made representations about those issues in a way that I think has had some impact.

And in certain circumstances we might make representations on behalf of specific company interests. But obviously we need to be briefed on those and we would look to work with you to determine – tactically – what is the best advocacy avenue for a particular issue.

3. Access

Obviously it's important for us to develop a wide range of contacts and networks in our countries of accreditation. And as a result, we are in a position to facilitate access for you to those contacts if it would be relevant for your business.

Alternatively, we can use the status of the office of the High Commission or Embassy to help provide that access.

I should say here that diplomats don't claim to always have the best access – truth be told, in many places where we're not able to visit as regularly as you, you probably have better access than we would.

But where it is appropriate for us to do so and where we can help you get a foot in the door, we will.

I just wanted to make some last points on issues of relevance to Australian business.

Firstly, I wanted to note the position on the issuing of visas to nationals of other countries who may be working for your Australian company. My colleagues and I don't personally issue visas and we don't seek to influence the decision making of immigration officials who are guided by very strict legislative requirements on who can and can't get a visa.

What we can do, however, is provide corroborative advice about your company or your business if we know you. And we can also work with our immigration

colleagues to make sure that the visa process is as transparent, timely and efficient as possible.

But companies do need to understand that there are service delivery standards and timeframes which our visa colleagues work to - there should not be an expectation that a visa officer will be able to issue a visa on the spot, in the absence of proper documentation, just because you asked the High Commissioner.

Second, I wanted to talk about consular issues. The Australian government is concerned to ensure the safety and welfare of Australians overseas which is why we publicise safety and security and other information in our regular travel advisories. We certainly encourage you to read those before travelling.

We also encourage you to register the presence of Australians overseas with the government through the Smartraveller website – this helps us to find people in the event of an emergency. The information provided is strictly protected by Australian privacy legislation.

I'm not stressing the importance of registration because of any higher risk profile in Africa than other parts of the world – the importance of registration applies to all Australians living or travelling overseas.

But we would encourage you to make it a standard operational practice for you and your employees to register on the Smartraveller website at www.smartraveller.gov.au.

So next time you hear us say: 'Hi, we're from the government and we're here to help' – you'll know that in the context of advancing our shared interests in Africa, we mean it.

Thank you.