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Anger as expat travel 'loophole' closed

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Tough new rules requiring Australians who live overseas to get permission to leave Australia are necessary to stop them taking the place of other people in the hotel quarantine system, the Morrison government says.

Health Minister Greg Hunt has removed an automatic exemption for Australians who normally reside overseas that allowed them to return to their usual home without getting specific permission to leave Australia.



Health Minister Greg Hunt has tightened rules on Australians trying to leave the country. **Alex Ellinghausen**

If they are in Australia, they will now need to convince the Australian Border Force they have a “compelling reason” to be granted permission to leave.

The change has further dismayed [thousands of stranded Australians overseas](#) who feel shut off and alienated by the Morrison government.

“This is an absolutely abhorrent and inhumane policy that essentially means I would have to choose between my life overseas and seeing my family,” one member of a Facebook group said.

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“Apparently, you can’t have both if you’re an Australian citizen.”

Since March 2020, the federal government has [banned Australian citizens from](#)

[leaving](#) the country unless they have approval, to minimise the risk of importing

COVID-19. Just a handful of countries, including North Korea, have similar strict controls.

The automatic exemption was in place for citizens normally living overseas to allow them to return easily to their ordinary place of residence.

But the government is concerned the exemption is being abused at a time when about 36,000 Australians registered with the Foreign Affairs Department, most of them permanent residents, just want to return home.

“The exemption was not intended to enable frequent travel between countries,” the government’s biosecurity declaration said.

“Further, as repatriation flights continue, it will be critical to manage the numbers of people leaving Australia with the intention of returning in the near future to ensure flight and quarantine availability is prioritised for individuals who have been stranded overseas for some time.

“The amendment will reduce the pressure on Australia’s quarantine capacity, reduce the risks posed to the Australian population from COVID-19 and assist in returning vulnerable Australians back home.”

People who breach the order face up to five years in jail and a \$66,000 fine.



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“We’ve seen too many instances where people have left the country only for in relatively short order to put their names on the request lists to come back into the country,” Finance Minister Simon Birmingham said.

“That just puts additional pressure and additional difficulties in terms of managing

the finite number places that can be safely administered for returning Australians.

“It’s important that people who are seeking to leave are either doing so because they’re returning to another place for residence for a long period of time or that they have a very strong and credible reason for doing so.”

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