

The Canberra Times

Expats left out, angry

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THOUSANDS of new Australian citizens will swear allegiance to their adopted country in nation-wide ceremonies on Australia Day tomorrow.

While they are made welcome, however, many more thousands of expatriate Australians around the world are feeling increasingly alienated by government policies which they claim exclude them from their home.

A Senate inquiry is uncovering a disenfranchised and frustrated group among the estimated one million Australians living overseas.

Many of them left Australia to pursue career opportunities unavailable at home and have complained to the inquiry about brick walls put up when they try to return, tall-poppy syndromes and a lack of respect for skills gained overseas.

But what frustrates them most of all is losing their right to vote and, in many cases, their citizenship.

"I've lost my birthright, they've taken that away from me," a Sydney-born British citizen, Margaret Brown, who was stripped of her Australian citizenship in 1973, said.

"I feel a sense of injustice. I shouldn't ever stop being Australian, my very first experiences of life were as an Australian." Although the Government has allowed dual citizenship since March 2002, those who were forced to give up their Australian passport before then must now show they intend to return "home" within three years to reclaim their citizen status.

But many expats like Ms Brown, 60, are uncertain what the future holds and are reluctant to make false claims on an official document.

The Southern Cross Group, a lobby group representing Australians overseas, pushed for the 1948 Citizenship Act to be changed to allow dual citizenship but feels it should go one step further and return citizenship to all who want it, regardless of whether they plan to return.

"It's quite an alienating feeling to have your citizenship taken away from you," Brussels-based lawyer Anne MacGregor, who co-founded the group in 2000, said.

"Why are you only a valuable citizen for Australia if you are in Australia? There's people who are so involved in Australian expat communities who have lost citizenship ...

"You only need to be in Australia for two years as a permanent resident to become an Australian citizen. There are other people who have spent 30 years or more in Australia but have lost their citizenship." The inquiry is examining how to best utilise what the Southern Cross Group has labelled the Australian Diaspora. It has received dozens of submissions from expats explaining what sent them and keeps them abroad and the issues that concern them.

Peter Klæbe, in Oregon, wrote, "Most importantly to me, I have lost my voting rights back home. I would like to have them restored. I am concerned about the

future of Australia, and consider it my responsibility to vote."

Mr Klæbe is one of 500,000 long-term expats who have lost the right to vote.

New York banker Heidi Rybak says she will possibly never return to Australia, largely because of the sexism she believed stifled her in the Australian banking sector.

"I also ask that you provide the ability to vote when abroad," she wrote.

"You are penalising us based on nothing concrete and we are beginning to feel almost locked out of the country."

Alan Bones in Ireland compared Australia's disregard for those who leave with the Irish authorities, who encourage their expats to return home and start businesses. - AAP

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Citizenship

Richard Moss

Monday, 26 January 2004

Oh, dear so all those people who made their decisions to turn their backs on their country (one because it was 'sexist' 30 years ago) now want their citizenship restored automatically, regardless of their intentions about ever returning. In fact, many frankly state that they probably won't return. They want the right to vote in elections in a country most of them have not lived in for many years, now know nothing about, and have no intention of returning to.

This is arrogant nonsense. These people simply want their cake and eat it too.

Frankly, we shouldn't have people voting in Australian elections whose current knowledge of, and commitment to, Australia is highly suspect.

The difference with migrants is that they have made a commitment to Australia by making their permanent homes here.

Whitlam and citizenship

Anne McGown

Tuesday, 27 January 2004

I have lived off shore for a few years now but never have I ever considered giving up my Australian citizenship. It's my Australian qualifications which have made me an attractive employee and for these I am eternally grateful to the Whitlam Government's policies. They made university free and people like myself from country non-squatter poor backgrounds were able to go to University.

Nothing wrong with my brain, by stymied by lack of ability to pay the ridiculous fees mate. My salary and prospects improved dramatically once I got my degree and I've had a good life because I got off my backside and took advantage of an opportunity which is no longer sadly available to many young Australians.

It's always been my intention to return home.