

Still call Australia home

Is John Howard preparing a special Federation centenary present for Australians — the right to hold dual citizenship and passports? The government has steadfastly refused to change the law that strips Australians of their Australian citizenship if they take up the passport of another country. But the ground appears to be shifting rapidly in Canberra on dual citizenship.

First, the Australian Citizenship Council recommended that Australia follow the lead of countries such as Britain and the United States in allowing dual citizenship. Based on this, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock took a submission to cabinet arguing the case.

The great fears of dual citizenship are that it would either allow Rupert Murdoch to run rampant through the media ownership laws, or that it would somehow detract from the value of Australian citizenship. The first is a nonsense. Murdoch could take out Australian citizenship tomorrow if he wanted. It is the cross-media rules that prevent him owning television stations here, not citizenship.

Many countries run dual citizenship with no suggestion that the value of their own citizenship has been damaged. Quite the contrary. Australian citizens,



particularly the booming number of business and professional people moving abroad to further their careers, are increasingly discriminated against by lack of dual citizenship.

Migrants coming here who take out Australian citizenship are allowed to retain their original citizenship. That means

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about five million Australians already hold dual citizenship. This discrimination against Australian-born citizens is the argument swaying the PM.

Howard's attention has been caught by Ruddock's argument that Australian-born citizens are handicapped in the global workplace. Howard has been nervous that allowing dual citizenship might appear to favour a small group of Australians. But the number of people now leaving permanently to work abroad — 40,000 last financial year — shows how many are adapting to global mobility. Those who are forced to relinquish their Australian citizenship to work abroad are a permanent loss to Australia.

After a recent cabinet discussion on the issue it was left to Howard to take "soundings" among migrant and business groups. No doubt he will hear

from the Southern Cross Group, a new Brussels-based lobby of Australians working in Europe which aims to end dual-citizenship discrimination. Like others, Southern Cross has spotted the opportunity of the impending Federation centenary for Howard to make what could be a long overdue but politically popular present to Australians.

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