

CITIZENS COMED

TRAVEL

Australians applying for dual citizenship may be surprised to hear that they're actually giving up their Australian roots - in the eyes of the law. GREG CORMACK finds out about the controversial Section 17.

As an Australian at the end of a working holiday visa, the crunch can come pretty quickly to get you out of the country you have lived and worked in for the past year or two. An impending deadline leaves you with a series of obvious options: get sponsored by your employer; take out a working visa in another European country; or go the whole hog and attempt to gain dual citizenship.

Every year, hundreds of Australians plump for the third option and take out citizenship of another country. What they are too often unaware of is that they are not in fact becoming dual citizens - in taking out citizenship of another country, they forfeit their Australian citizenship altogether. In many cases, the individual is not even aware they have ceased to be an Australian until some years later.

Section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act 1948 is the legislation that enforces this situation. People who acquire their first citizenship in another country, by birth or descent, are able to also hold citizenship in Australia. But under Section 17, anyone who starts with Australian citizenship and then later acquires citizenship in another country automatically forfeits their Australian citizenship.

"A big problem is that many people just don't know they will lose their Australian citizenship if they take another," says Anne MacGregor, co-founder of the Southern Cross Group.

A non-profit organisation founded in Brussels, Belgium in January 2000 (and, incidentally, with no connection to this magazine), the Southern Cross Group works towards helping Australian individuals fully utilise their right to an international identity. The main target of their efforts at present is to have Section 17 repealed.

"Sometimes, people have acquired other citizenships without realising that they will lose their Australian citizenship," MacGregor explains. "When they go along to get their Australian passport renewed, they have to fill in a

form (an Australian Overseas Passport Application).

"At the very end, where you sign the form, it says: 'I declare that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, I am an Australian citizen, I have not applied for and consequently acquired the citizenship of another country ...'"

Not the best way to find out, certainly. The fact that many people know Australians who hold dual citizenship, due to birth or ancestry rights, leads them to assume it is possible for any Australian to do likewise. And a fair enough assumption it is. But it is incredibly distressing to suddenly be told it's been years since you've been true blue.

Beyond the fact that it represents an inequitable situation on an individual level (five million Australians legally hold citizenship in other countries), Section 17 also forces negative consequences for Australia as a nation, as Southern Cross Group's John Russell points out.

"If an Australian goes to work overseas for a number of years, that may be very good for their personal professional careers, but upon returning home to Australia they obviously bring back knowledge and a lot of benefits to Australia from the experiences they have gained. At the moment, under Section 17, we are losing those people and their experience. These people are tremendous resources that are being lost to Australia forever."

The issues surrounding Section 17 and the proposed amendments to the Australian Citizenship Act 1948 are covered in full detail on the Southern Cross Group's website, at www.southern-cross-group.org. Australians living overseas are encouraged to visit the site to gain familiarity with the effects of Section 17.

The site also provides contact details for Prime Minister John Howard - as pressure mounts to have Section 17 repealed, take the opportunity to make him aware of the thoughts of Australians living outside Australia.

