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## **Expats angry at citizenship law delay**

By RICHARD BAKER

### **The Age**

Monday 21 May 2001

Thousands of Australian expatriates wanting to reclaim their citizenship are furious that the Federal Government has delayed its decision on dual nationality laws, according to a lobby group representing Australians living abroad.

The Brussels-based Southern Cross Group, with 750 members, has accused the Coalition of putting short-term political interests before the best interests of Australians after Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock last week called for more public consultation before changing the law that requires Australians taking out a foreign nationality to forfeit their existing citizenship.

Although Mr Ruddock admitted the government was "disposed to support" changes to the law, Southern Cross Group co-founder John Russell said Australians were being penalised by the government's failure to immediately embrace an Australian Citizenship Council report that called for changes to the Citizenship Act.

Mr Russell, a lawyer working in Belgium, said many Australians would be forced to lose their citizenship while the government sought unnecessary consultation.

"It is simply beyond logic for Philip Ruddock to claim at this stage that further community consultation is necessary on this issue," Mr Russell said from Brussels.

"The government appointed a group of eminent Australians chaired by Sir Ninian Stephen to advise it as the Citizenship Council in late 1998. The council put out an issues paper in February, 1999, in which it canvassed dual citizenship and invited comments by April of that year. Nearly three-quarters of the submissions to the council addressed this issue of loss of Australian citizenship upon acquisition of another."

Unlike the US, Britain and New Zealand, Australia is one of only a few Western countries that does not permit its citizens to take out a foreign nationality. About five million Australians enjoy dual nationality status by virtue of descent or naturalisation.

The Australian coordinator of SCG, Ellie Palmer, said the group had been hitting the offices of Prime Minister John Howard and Mr Ruddock with thousands of e-mails and faxes detailing the hardships caused by Australia's citizenship laws.

"Many are particularly personal. One came from an Australian lady married to an American and living in America. She has refused to give up her Australian citizenship and take on US citizenship, yet because of this, anything her husband wants to leave her in his will will be hugely taxed by the US Government because she can't become a dual citizen," Ms Palmer said.

She said thousands of Australians working abroad were being denied full social security benefits and voting rights in the countries where they lived and contributed financially because they were unable to take out citizenship of their host country.

The SCG and the Federal Opposition have accused the government of "squeezing" on a decision on the citizenship law, for fear of a nationalist and One Nation backlash.

Changes to permit dual nationality would mean people such as media baron Rupert Murdoch, who lost his Australian citizenship after becoming a US citizen, would be able to regain their Australian identities.