

Australia may relax bar on dual passports

The Federal Government may relax the bar on Australians taking out foreign citizenship, opening the door for people such as media titan Rupert Murdoch to hold dual passports.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock said the Government was likely to support an Australian Citizenship Council recommendation made last year to repeal Section 17 of the Citizenship Act.

The section requires Australians taking out foreign nationality to forfeit their existing citizenship. But the council, after taking a wide range of submissions, said the advantages of dual citizenship, including access to economic opportunities overseas, outweighed the disadvantages.

One of those forced to give up his Australian citizenship under Section 17 was Mr Murdoch, who opted for a US pas-

port while building his global media empire in the US.

Mr Ruddock said the Government was disposed to support the council recommendation, but would again consult the community before making changes.

"Given the significance of this change to long-standing citizenship law and practice, it is important that the community has a further opportunity to express its opinions," he said.

But opposition welfare spokesman Con Sciacca said the minister had squibbed on a decision for political reasons.

"How long have they got to consult for? They've dogged it. If he's disposed to repeal the rule, why doesn't he just do it," he said.

Mr Sciacca said the Government was nervous of stirring up nationalist opposition and antagonising One Nation supporters in an election year. "They're pussyfooting around with this because obviously

they're concerned about any political implications," he said.

He said Labor was committed to repealing Section 17, which discriminated against more than 14 million Australians who could benefit from a foreign passport.

"Australia is one of the very small number of Western countries that don't allow dual citizenship," he said. "We live in a globalised world and it's important young Australians be able to hone their skills and careers overseas, like many are doing already in IT."

Mr Sciacca said sources had told him the proposal had been blocked by Prime Minister John Howard in Cabinet.

Announcing the plan, Mr Ruddock said the Government would also engage on a major campaign mid-year to enhance perceptions of citizenship. Part of that campaign would include the establishment of Australian Citizenship Day, to be held annually on September 17. — AAP