

Once an Australian . . .

The government's support for dual citizenship makes national, and international, sense.

THE Federal Government has indicated its intention to change Section 17 of the Citizenship Act, which forces natural-born Australians who take out foreign nationality to repeal their Australian citizenship. One of its most famous victims is Rupert Murdoch, who became an American citizen in 1985 and is technically no longer an Australian, although his considerable corporate and property holdings in this country tell quite a different story. Murdoch, however, is only one of thousands of expatriates who will be able to reclaim Australian citizenship if the law is changed, as now seems inevitable. Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock said last week, in response to a report from the Australian Citizenship Council, that the government was "disposed to support" the repeal, which makes it only a matter of time, regardless of the outcome of the federal election, since the change has strong support from Labor. The matter also has considerable public support (nationalist extremes notwithstanding); more than three-quarters of the report's submissions want a repeal. Care should be taken, though, not to go too far: triple or quadruple citizenships should not be encouraged.

The changes make sense for various reasons, not the least of which is the anomalous situation that, while some people are forbidden dual citizenship, at least 4.4 million Australians have and continue to possess it because of their birthright, their parents or through marriage. Why shouldn't the same rights apply to the legion of men and women who now live and work in foreign countries for extended periods and whose residence or employment is often conditional on their becoming citizens? They are still Australians, and it is not their fault that they don't have the right to call themselves that. It is also no longer peculiar for a nation to accept dual citizenship: Australia would be in common with the United States, Britain, Switzerland, France and South Africa. In fact, the very heart of the European Union is based on common citizenship and the freedom of business, cultural and social interaction it brings.

The advantages of Australian citizenship mean more than the right to vote; it also brings with it a sense of belonging, as well as defining identity — essential qualities in a modern, changing world. The government clearly recognises this, and its establishment of Australian Citizenship Day on September 17 is an appropriate way to focus attention on what we are or, more important, what we should be. It is hoped some of our 950,000 permanent residents will wish to become citizens. But, for as long as that privilege continues to be withdrawn from rightful Australians, the real meaning remains ambiguous.