

The Southern Cross Group

Promoting Mobility in the Global Community

Brussels, Washington, London and Canberra



PRESS RELEASE

Government Afraid to Treat All Australians Equally

Thousands of Australians living in the four corners of the globe today are angry and frustrated with the Howard government. With the government's blessing and encouragement, some five million Australians already enjoy the privileges of dual citizenship, by virtue of descent or naturalisation. But today the government was unwilling to grant equal treatment to the other three-quarters of Australian citizens and continues to penalise Australians living abroad.

The government's failure to embrace a February 2000 Australian Citizenship Council recommendation to amend the *Citizenship Act* means that those starting from a base of having only Australian citizenship will continue to lose their Australian nationality when they acquire another citizenship.

The Southern Cross Group ("SCG") - the only international non-profit advocacy organisation representing Australians living and working abroad - was highly critical of Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock's announcement made in Melbourne this afternoon.

Speaking from Brussels, SCG Co-founder, John Russell, said: "It is simply beyond logic for Philip Ruddock to claim at this stage that further community consultation is necessary on this issue. 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.

"Only a very small proportion of the submissions argued in favour of such loss. Since the Council came out with its unequivocal recommendation to repeal Section 17 of the Act in February 2000, the Prime Minister, Mr Ruddock and other Cabinet members have been deluged with an unrelenting stream of personal and impassioned pleas to accept the recommendation."

In Washington DC, Anne MacGregor, SCG North American Coordinator, said: "We can only speculate that the government is putting its own short-term political interests ahead of the best interests of Australia in the global community.

"Today's announcement sends a clear and very disappointing message that the government has simply not grasped the fact that the Australian Diaspora - which consists of some 820,000-odd Australians in virtually every country in the world - is an untapped and important resource for the nation. Countries which allow dual citizenship for all of their nationals understand the mutual benefits of maintaining a connection with their overseas populations even if another citizenship is acquired. The government has just kicked thousands of loyal Australians in the teeth. This stalling tactic by the government will be recognised for what it is."

Many countries, including United States, Great Britain, New Zealand, Ireland, France, Italy and Canada, do not demand that their citizens forfeit their citizenship on acquisition of another nationality. The SCG has campaigned strongly for the repeal of Section 17 of the *Australian*

Citizenship Act 1948. The government is well aware that many Australians living overseas have been denied full social security benefits and voting rights in the countries where they reside and contribute, because they have not been able to take out citizenship of their host country while continuing to hold Australian citizenship. Others have been prevented from accepting government jobs or standing for office in their local overseas communities.

Those who have lost their Australian citizenship under Section 17 over the years have often done so unwittingly - discovering later that they are no longer Australian citizens, and that they need a visa to return to Australia to visit family and friends or move "home".

The Australian Labor Party has indicated that it will repeal Section 17 if it is elected later this year.

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