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Expats fight dual-citizenship battle

Fifty years after Australia outlawed dual-citizenship to born-and-bred Aussies, expats are building a resistance, demanding that the dated legislation be overturned. Fiona Cameron reports.

Frustration is increasing among thousands of Australian expatriates who want to take out dual citizenship as the Australian government delays a decision on dual nationality laws.



Under current laws only migrants and their direct descendants, approximately 25 percent of the population, can take on dual citizenship.

However, native-born Australians must forfeit their citizenship if they want to take on that of another country.

"There are between four and five million legal dual citizens in Australia," says Anne McGregor, an Australian lawyer living in Washington and campaigner for the Brussels-based Southern Cross lobby group (SCG).

"So why shouldn't the other three-quarters of the population have the same rights?"

The SCG has accused the Australian government of dragging its heels on the issue. In May, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock announced that the Australian government was "disposed" to repeal the law, but wanted first to have more "community consultation".

"The government needs to hear personal stories," says McGregor.

McGregor says that around 1,000 expats have written to the offices of Ruddock and Prime Minister John Howard with stories in the last 12 months.

She recommends that expats send faxes or letters explaining how they or their families have been or could be disenfranchised by the law, or, for those already legally holding dual citizenship, the benefits this has given them.

The main sticking point for the critics of the dual-citizenship is that it raises the issue of divided loyalty.

But McGregor says this is not relevant, for most people simply want to take out dual citizenship for practical reasons - including flexibility of employment and travel and full access to social security benefits and voting rights in countries where they contribute financially.

Not only that, she adds, the world is a very different place from that of 50 years ago, when Australia's current citizenship laws were created.

Increasing global mobility means many in the international community support dual nationality. The US, UK and New Zealand all allow dual citizenship. Sweden is changing its laws on July 1.

"You can belong at different levels to more than one community," says McGregor.

"I read Australian newspapers, my heritage is there, but I'm also part of Washington, having lived there for 10 years. It's reality. Why is that so hard to accept?"

"Australia is a country of immigrants. We don't ask this of our Greek and Croatian immigrants. Multiculturalism is an established concept; we are supposed to respect other people's heritage."

She recounts the story of an Australian who worked in Belgium for 25 years, and paid pension contributions during that time, but was unable to retire in Australia because under Belgian law as a non-EU national she could not get her pension paid out to her in Australia.

Then there's the case of an Australian who took out Irish nationality. Under dual citizenship laws he automatically lost his Australian citizenship upon approval of his Irish passport, but never found out until his father in Australia died and he was told he needed a visa to return to his funeral.

Or, the Australian woman married to a Frenchman who took out French citizenship in order to work. She was able to resume her citizenship some years later, but in the interim period had had a child, who was then not Australian by descent.

The SCG has accused the Australian Government of stalling on the citizenship issue due to this year's likely election, combined with fears of a backlash from nationalist groups and far-right political elements like One Nation.

The group also says that the current citizenship laws are encouraging "brain drain" - the permanent loss of talent and skills from Australia.

"When the government takes away the incentive for expats to return to Australia permanently, they also lose those expats' financial assets," says McGregor.

More information

The Southern Cross Group will be having an open meeting discussing mobility barriers at 6.30pm on Monday 18 June, with speakers including the Australian Ambassador to the European Union, Belgium and Luxembourg, in the Australian Embassy, Rue Guilmard 6-8, Brussels, Belgium (Metro Stop Arts Loi).

Australian Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock has called for expatriates to send personal testimonials of their disadvantage under the current system to Canberra by July 6.

You can send a standard free fax to the Australian Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, or get help writing a personal submission, through the Southern Cross Group website: www.southern-cross-group.org