



## Friends, Romans, countrymen

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Citizenship, as this newspaper argued last month when the Federal Government announced its intention to amend the Citizenship Act, is about more than being the bearer of entitlements such as the right to vote. It is also about having an identity, a sense of belonging. And, in a world in which national borders are more porous than they have ever been and an increasing number of people live outside their countries of origin for extended periods, many people can reasonably claim to have a sense of belonging to more than one part of the globe. That is why people who have migrated to Australia from elsewhere often continue to hold dual citizenship, and it is why the government is right to end the Citizenship Act's requirement that people born in this country must relinquish their Australian citizenship if they take out the citizenship of another country. For some, dual citizenship is merely a matter of convenience, of claiming pension entitlements or of working abroad legally, but for others it is also a matter of political participation: they vote in elections in their country of origin as well as in Australia. People who hold dual citizenship can scarcely be denied the right to exercise all the prerogatives of citizenship in each of their homelands, including the vote, but what is to be said about an attempt by one country to give its citizens abroad a special status in its politics?

Italy's newly elected Berlusconi Government has established a Ministry for Italians Abroad, which is to oversee legislation creating parliamentary seats specifically for Italy's expatriate citizens. The proposal, under which Australia and other countries grouped under the regional title "Oceania" would get one MP in Rome, is vague, but seems to involve more than just a desire to ensure that Italians living abroad should be able to exercise their rights. Simply allowing them to cast postal votes, a measure on which all Italian political parties have now reached agreement, would do that. Creating specific constituencies for expatriates implies that they have needs that justify separate representation, however, and it is difficult to know just what these special needs are supposed to be. Pension entitlements and other practical matters affecting Italians living in Australia can be, and are, dealt with by government-to-government negotiation, and cynics might wonder whether the real purpose of the Berlusconi Government's curious plan is to trawl abroad for votes it is not confident of winning or retaining at home. If that is what Mr Berlusconi's Forza Italia party and its coalition partners have in mind, they may find that the scheme backfires. Faced with the surreal prospect of enduring an electoral campaign in Australia about Italian domestic political issues, some Italian Australians might decide that their sense of belonging to the old country is no longer as strong, in political terms at least, as it used to be.