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Australia to allow dual citizenship

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The Australian government is to change the law to allow Australians who acquire another citizenship to retain their Australian citizenship.

"The government will move to repeal section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act so that in future, Australians will no longer lose their citizenship if they acquire another citizenship," said Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Philip Ruddock.

This decision follows widespread support from Australia's expatriate community over the last few years, as well as from groups such as the Australian Citizenship Council.

"We received over 800 public submissions since the release of a discussion paper and almost all submissions expressed support for the repeal of section 17," Ruddock said.

"This change will allow the growing numbers of internationally mobile Australians to take advantage of opportunities overseas while maintaining their links with Australia and bringing back to the Australian community their valuable expertise and knowledge," Ruddock said.

It will also bring Australia into line with the citizenship law of other countries, including the UK, Canada, New Zealand, US, France and Italy.

The changes will apply to those Australian citizens who acquire another citizenship after the new law comes into effect. Until then, Australians will continue to lose their citizenship if they acquire another.

Individuals who have lost their citizenship in the past under section 17 will not be able to regain it when the legislation is amended.

"This represents a step in the right direction for Australia to become fully engaged in the global economy. Australians abroad will now be able to play a greater role in the countries in which they operate," said co-founder John Russell of the Southern Cross Group (SCG), a lobby group for expatriate Australians.

However, the SCG warned that Australians could still be stripped of their Australian citizenship if they acquire the citizenship of another country, until the new legislation comes into force.

The government has not said when the change will be made. The SCG has called for the change to be made before the next federal election, which is likely to be later this year.

Some five million Australians currently enjoy the privileges of dual citizenship, through hereditary rights.