

## Editorial

### **Our citizens of the world: welcome back**

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CAN we be "multi-national" citizens? Is it possible to owe allegiance to more than one country? After more than half a century of debate, the Government has decided to allow Australians who acquire another citizenship to retain their Australian citizenship. The decision puts an end to the anomalies that have kept Australia out of step with economic globalisation, the communications revolution, the rapid growth of international travel and increasing personal mobility. It recognises the value of the Australian diaspora and will help us to make the most out of the new international mobility of skilled labour.

The decision, however, will not end the debate over our national identity. It will upset those who believe that citizenship has become the latest victim of globalisation -- a commodity useful for its economic value rather than as a means of fostering social cohesion. Blurring the concept of citizenship weakens loyalties and ultimately the nation state. Dual citizenship, its opponents argue, also creates problems in areas such national service and taxation.

None of these arguments are new. What has changed and what makes the Government's decision a pragmatic one, is the domestic and international environment. Dual citizenship has long been a fact of life for the more than five million Australians born overseas and their children. The decision to amend Section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act 1948 ends the discrimination against those people born and bred in Australia who would automatically lose their citizenship if they acquired a second nationality for employment or personal reasons such as marriage. The decision is not about giving privileges to a select few, but about providing potentially all Australians the opportunity to take full advantage of the globalised economy without having to forfeit their right to remain Australian. The strongest pressure for change has been coming not from migrant lobby groups, but from Australians wanting to join the internationally mobile workforce. Dual citizenship can clear administrative hurdles and help manage social security and healthcare.

The decision will also regularise what in any case was an increasingly irrelevant and unenforceable law. Australia never had the legal power to require migrants to divest themselves of former citizenships if they came from countries that allowed dual citizenship. As the Australian Citizenship Council noted in its 1999 report, it has been virtually impossible to legally enforce the requirement that born-and-bred Australians give up their citizenship if they settle in another country. Reciprocal reporting arrangements between Australia and other countries on citizenship, the report noted, have largely lapsed due to privacy and resource considerations.

With the number of permanent departures from Australia at record numbers, a decision to amend the Citizenship Act has been long over due. New Zealand and Britain have allowed dual citizenship for more than 50 years, and Australia is not alone in reforming citizenship laws. Above all, the change will mean that those of us who live overseas but want to "still call Australia home" will soon be able to do so without guilt or trepidation. Let's face it. Australia will always be a small part of the global marketplace.

Our best and brightest will always be attracted overseas -- and often they will be great ambassadors for the rest of us. But we still offer our own Australian uniqueness -- from our climate to our lifestyle -- that few locally born people want to be cut off from. Only a stupid sort of patriotism forces enterprising Australians to choose between grasping opportunities abroad or keeping their official Australian status.