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AUSTRALIAN CITIZENSHIP DAY 2002

Australian citizenship is the common bond that unites our multicultural nation. As such, the celebration of Australian Citizenship Day today has implications for all Australians, regardless of their birthplace, ancestry or religious or other affiliations.

The most recent census recorded the presence of almost 16.6 million Australian citizens on Census night. This figure included almost 3 million people who had been born overseas. It is not well understood that the concept of Australian citizenship has only been in existence for 53 years. Prior to 26 January 1949 anyone born or naturalised in Australia was legally a British subject.

Labor has a proud record on citizenship issues. It was the Chifley Government that introduced Australian citizenship, the Whitlam Government that named the relevant legislation as the Australian Citizenship Act (the specific event commemorated today) and the Keating Government that introduced the current Pledge of Commitment made by those acquiring Australian citizenship. The Opposition supports continuing efforts to encourage those permanent residents eligible to apply for citizenship to do so. It is estimated that there are some 900,000 people in this situation.

In line with global trends, there are large numbers of Australians living overseas on an extended basis. Too often their circumstances are overlooked in community debates about citizenship, migration and other policies. Labor was pleased to support the repeal of section 17 of the Act with effect from 4 April 2002. While overseas Australians who acquire another citizenship no longer face the loss of their Australian citizenship, the Government remains unwilling to modernise the resumption requirements for those who lost their citizenship in earlier times but who dearly desire to regain it. This is a glaring omission from the Government's current citizenship promotion campaign.

The Opposition also urges the Government to investigate the particular circumstances of several thousand Maltese Australians who, having been born in Australia, subsequently went to Malta with their parents to live. Under Maltese law that applied until February 2000 these young people on reaching 18 years of age were forced to choose between Australian or Maltese citizenship before their 19th birthday. Many renounced their Australian citizenship in order to retain work, education and property owning rights in Malta. Under present rules these people are effectively unable to resume their lost Australian citizenship, where they wish to do so.

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