

Australians can become citizens of the world

By LARISSA DUBECKI
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Proposed legislative changes allowing Australian-born citizens to hold dual nationalities are expected to help stem Australia's "brain drain" and simplify life for Australia's nearly one million expatriates.

Officially, about 700 Australians each year lose their citizenship through the operation of section 17 of the 1948 Citizenship Act - in which citizenship is automatically lost if another citizenship is taken out. But the Immigration Department freely admits the real figure is much higher.

Previously only overseas-born Australians were able to hold two passports, but in laws introduced to parliament this week, the government will repeal section 17, thereby allowing Australians who acquire another citizenship to retain their Australian citizenship.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock said the change to the laws reflected a shift in the global labour market. It would allow, he said, "the growing numbers of internationally mobile Australians to take advantage of opportunities overseas ... and bringing back to the Australian community their valuable expertise and knowledge".

Estimates from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade indicate that 820,000 people - 5 per cent of Australia's population - were living overseas as at December, 2000.

In 1999-2000, about 85,000 Australian residents left the country for a year or more, and 41,000 residents - of whom half were Australian-born - left Australia permanently, the highest figure for 27 years.

Australia is losing skilled workers at a faster rate than it is gaining them, said Anna Bodi of the workplace culture change research centre CWCC.

"The balance has been shifting away rather than having people move here. We're disadvantaged in terms of our dollar and the salaries we can pay people," Dr Bodi said.

"The question that was raised with section 17 was, are barriers being put in the way of those people at a later stage coming back here to bring their skills and their partner's skills and their family's skills back here? Every factor that takes away from our competitiveness is not a good thing for us to be doing."

Anne MacGregor, lawyer and founder of the Southern Cross Group, an advocacy group representing Australian expatriates, said the "brain drain" was not confined just to the highly publicised science and IT industries.

"We have contacts with many hundreds of people who work overseas who experience problems with being prevented from taking out another citizenship, and they come from all sorts of backgrounds," she said.

Many thousands of Australians have lost their citizenship since the introduction of the law more than 50 years ago, and many more have been disadvantaged in their adopted country by refusing to relinquish their Australian citizenship.

Julian Anderson, an Australian living in the US and president of the North American group of quantity surveying businesses Rider Hunt Levett and Bailey, said the business had missed out on government contracts worth millions of dollars because of his lack of US citizenship.

"With the repeal of section 17, I will be able to hold US and Australian citizenship and our US practice will then be able to do work for the Department of State."

Australia is one of only a few Western countries that does not permit its citizens to take out a foreign nationality.

The government's decision follows widespread community consultation and a report by the Australian Citizenship Council recommending the move.

Changes to the legislation have been criticised for not going far enough. The bill will not be made retrospective, and the Southern Cross Group wants the government to make a further amendment to allow the children of people who lost their citizenship to apply for Australian citizenship.