

Australian-born Maltese fight for Australian citizenship

As Australian citizenship day was being marked last Tuesday, a number of Maltese born in Australia were still fighting for their right to live and work in the country.

Norman Bonello, a member of the Southern Cross Group which represents some 860,000 Australian-born people living overseas, said a number of people had been forced to renounce their Australian citizenship when they left the country.

However, with the advent of dual citizenship legislation, they were now calling for reforms to be made to the Australian Citizenship Act.

A particular anomaly, Mr Bonello said, existed with regard to people who formally had to renounce their Australian citizenship in the past because their new country of residence would not allow them to hold two passports.

"The renunciation problem is nowhere more acute than in the Maltese-Australian community.

"Although both Australia and Malta recently modernised their domestic laws to allow dual citizenship, several thousand historical victims remain.

"Many Maltese migrated to Australia after the Second World War. Children born to Maltese parents in Australia were automatically Australian by birth.

They also enjoyed Maltese citizenship by descent, giving them dual nationality.

"However, until Maltese law was amended two years ago, young Maltese Australians were required under Maltese law to decide whether they wished to be Australian or Maltese citizens when they reached the age of 18."

Many Maltese-Australians born in Australia returned to Malta before they were 18.

As a result, they usually decided to renounce Australian citizenship because there was no real practical or financial alternative if one wanted to make a life in Malta.

"Several thousand former Australian citizens in Malta today still feel that they belong in two places and should be allowed to hold dual citizenship.

"But Australian law at present does not permit them to resume their lost Australian citizenship. Although the Australian Citizenship Act was recently amended to allow a person to resume a renounced citizenship up until age 25, this is of no use to the vast majority of the Maltese who are above that age.

"At present, the only way for these Maltese citizens to regain their Australian citizenship is to apply to migrate back to Australia.

"If they successfully gain a migration visa, after being a permanent resident in Australia for one year they can then apply to become naturalized Australian citizens.

"Due to recent changes, under Maltese law they will not lose their Maltese citizenship," he said.

Quoting John MacGregor, the Australian Coordinator of the Southern Cross Group in Canberra, Mr Bonello said it was ironic that the Australian government should be so vigorously encouraging Australia's 900,000 permanent residents to become Australian citizens, while it was turning its back on a significant group of people who were "Australian" in everything but the legal sense.

The group is calling on all Australian citizens, permanent residents and former Australian citizens to send their views directly to the Australian Citizenship Minister, Gary Hardgrave, MP on the Southern Cross Group website, affirming their commitment to Australia and at the same time urging the government to rethink the law on citizenship resumption.

<http://www.southern-cross-group.org/affirmation/dualaffirmation.html>