

Forced to be un-Australian, far from home

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There is no doubt that one of Australia Day's highlights must be the conferral of Australian citizenship on some 8100 permanent residents, and the affirmation ceremonies around the country for those existing Australian citizens.

But as our new Minister for Citizenship, Gary Hardgrave, was busy attending no fewer than three citizenship ceremonies on our national day, I wonder if he stopped to consider the irony of the fact that at least 600 citizens are still being lost to the country each year as Australians overseas continue to forfeit their Australian citizenship when they take out a foreign citizenship.

Mr Hardgrave must have been so busy preparing for our new citizens since he became Minister for Citizenship that he hasn't had time to respond to several hundred faxes, e-mails and letters written to him about this by very worried existing citizens in the past two months.

All they want to know is when exactly the government is going to actually repeal Section 17 of the Citizenship Act - after all, it promised it would do so on August 3, 2001.

What does Mr Hardgrave want to tell the Australian lawyer in Ireland who couldn't wait any longer and had to take out Irish citizenship in order to practise his profession and earn a living (his Australian citizenship is gone now)?

And how will he compensate the elderly war bride in the United States who had to give up her Australian citizenship recently so that if her US-citizen husband predeceases her, the US Internal Revenue Service will leave her something to live on for the rest of her days? She didn't want to stop being Australian either.

Yes, Australian citizenship is a wonderful thing. However, thousands of loyal Australians overseas would perhaps feel more celebratory on Australia Day if Mr Hardgrave could just tell them exactly when he is going to stop taking their citizenship away from them.

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