

The Southern Cross Group

Promoting Mobility in the Global Community



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MEDIA RELEASE

Expat Group Calls for Action on Promised Citizenship Law Changes

The Southern Cross Group, an international non-profit advocacy group representing Australians overseas, today called on the Government to follow through promptly on the promise it made last year to amend Australia's citizenship laws and finally allow all Australians the right to hold dual citizenship.

Immigration Minister Ruddock announced on 3 August 2001 that the Government intended to repeal Section 17 of the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948*. This provision strips Australians of their Australian citizenship when they acquire another citizenship. Although legislation to repeal the provision was introduced into the House of Representatives on 23 August, the bill lapsed when Parliament rose for the Federal Election.

Anne MacGregor, one of the co-founders of the Southern Cross Group, said in Canberra today that the fact that the promised policy change was not yet law was causing great confusion among Australian citizens overseas. "People think that because the Government has announced the change, Section 17 has already been repealed", she said. "We are hearing of cases where people are now taking out other citizenships, thinking that they will no longer lose their Australian citizenship. Unfortunately, until the amending legislation is passed and assented to, they will still forfeit their Australian citizenship."

The Southern Cross Group received an assurance from Mr Ruddock prior to the election that a re-elected Coalition government would "reintroduce the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill as a matter of priority".

"But we still haven't had any firm indication from either Mr Ruddock or the new Minister for Citizenship, Gary Hardgrave, as to whether the bill will be introduced in February when Parliament resumes," said MacGregor. "Every day that goes by now means that more innocent Australians overseas are falling victim to the provision."

Although the promised repeal of Section 17 will prevent further Australians from losing their citizenship, it will not assist those former Australians who have lost their citizenship under the provision in the past. At present, a person in this category still living overseas can only resume their lost Australian citizenship if they intend to return to live in Australia within three years.

No solution has been proposed by the Government to bring those former Australians who wish to live abroad indefinitely back into the Australian fold. MacGregor says that many Southern Cross Group members fall into this category, and that the Group intends to work for amendments to the resumption provisions in the Act once Section 17 has been repealed. She maintains that it is ridiculous that a person who was born in Australia and continues to have property, family and other close ties in Australia, has to apply for a visa to enter Australia because they are no longer formally an Australian citizen. "One of our members was extremely distressed at having to get a visa to come home at very short notice to attend his own father's funeral," she said.

Opposition Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Laurie Ferguson MP, also urged the Government to deliver on the promised legislation in a separate media release today.

Further Information: www.southern-cross-group.org

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