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AUSTRALIAN CITIZENSHIP A UNIFYING FORCE

Today's celebration of Citizenship Day is a timely reminder that our citizenship system is the common bond that unites all Australians, regardless of our birthplace, ethnic background or religious beliefs.

The Australian citizenship system was introduced by the Chifley Labor Government in 1949 and was made non-discriminatory by the Whitlam Government in 1973. By international standards our system is welcoming to newcomers and a unifying force in an increasingly diverse population. It has also been heralded in an increasingly globalised world.

Labor strongly supports continuing efforts to encourage our 950,000 eligible permanent residents to take up citizenship. We would seek to increase the current take up rate of just over 75%.

The Opposition has a comprehensive agenda to strengthen and improve the system. Just as we introduced a new Pledge of Commitment in 1993, we are the only Party that is proposing to insert a statement of purpose or objects into the Citizenship Act and to spell out the responsibilities and privileges that arise from acquiring citizenship. It is not good enough for such key legislation to simply set out the technical requirements and procedures for the acquisition, loss and resumption of citizenship.

Labor's other citizenship measures include commitments to:

- Reactivate the Australian Citizenship Council to promote citizenship and monitor and give advice on current legislation and policy,
- Revise the resumption guidelines for those deprived of Australian citizenship when they took out another citizenship prior to April 2002,
- Resolve the situation of Maltese Australians who were forced to renounce their citizenship under the previous requirements of Maltese law,
- Improve DIMIA citizenship data and reporting systems, which currently hinder proper reporting and accountability,

- Undertake bilateral discussions with other countries on nationality and citizenship matters to advance the interests of Australian nationals.

Labor will also ensure that the more than 800,000 Australians who live overseas do not continue to be the forgotten. We were responsible for initiating Australia's first ever parliamentary inquiry into the needs and concerns of expatriate Australians, conducted by the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee. This inquiry received more than 670 written submissions and will shortly be presenting its findings and recommendations to the Senate.

It is clear that the Coalition has left it to Labor to provide leadership on citizenship policy issues. It only had the courage to repeal section 17 after Labor had publicly undertaken to do so. It resisted all proposals to modernise the citizenship resumption requirements until Minister Hardgrave's massive election eve back flip. Even then the Government was unable to produce the necessary amending legislation before the Parliament was dissolved.

The one thing a Labor Government will not do is to use the citizenship system for misguided efforts at self-promotion, as Minister Hardgrave has done. We will not be holding ceremonies that cost taxpayers \$200,000, or conducting them in hardware stores or in Qantas planes circling Melbourne. Equally we will ensure that citizenship ceremonies are conducted in a dignified and non-partisan manner, as befits their role in our democratic system.

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