

Migration nightmare ends for family

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By Norrie Ross

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A MELBOURNE-born couple who were branded outcasts have won the right to call themselves Aussies again.

Steve and Lillian Schembri have resumed their citizenship after a four-year migration nightmare.

Fearing deportation, they spent tens of thousands of dollars fighting government bureaucracy.

"We're just relieved this is over," Mr Schembri said from his Burnside Heights home yesterday.

"I have to admit there were times when I wondered if this was worth it. But I thought, 'This is my country. We're Aussies.'

"I'm an Australian. It's me. It's who I am."

Their problems began in 2002 when they decided to return from Malta after an 18-year absence. A quirk in citizenship laws meant they had fewer rights than foreign-born migrants.

Though Mr Schembri, 41, barracks for the Western Bulldogs and is a petrolhead who loves Holdens, eats Vegemite, and has two boys who play cricket, he was told they weren't welcome.

They weren't allowed to resume their citizenship, and lived on the knife-edge of temporary visas as politicians argued over law changes.

They've been paying taxes, but haven't been entitled to Medicare or other benefits.

Their battle was only won when new laws allowing them to resume their citizenship came into force in July.

Ms Schembri said that on picking up the certificates this week, she couldn't control herself. "I ran out screaming and yelling 'We're Aussies again'," she said.

"People were looking at me like I was crazy."

Their Maltese-born children Glenn, 15, Clint, 14, and Chereece, 8, have also won citizenship.

Their plight was first highlighted in the Herald Sun three years ago.

"If it hadn't been for the Herald Sun we would have been deported," Mr Schembri said. "We would never have been able to get our voice heard."

Mr Schembri's parents decided to return to Malta in 1984 after 20 years in Melbourne.

Then 18, he had to renounce Australian citizenship to retain Maltese citizenship. Ms Schembri, then his fiancée, also reluctantly renounced citizenship.

They were told it would not affect their ability to return here.

Actor Russell Crowe certainly recognised Mr Schembri as an Aussie when they met on the set of *Gladiator* in Malta.

On hearing Mr Schembri, who had an extra's role as a centurion, the Oscar-winning actor exclaimed: "Mate, you're an Aussie!"