

Long road to citizenship

John Stapleton | *July 23, 2007*

THEY may have been born overseas to Australian mothers, but for tens of thousands of people scattered around the world and born before 1949, that wasn't enough for them to become Australian citizens.

Now, the remaining historical sexual discrimination has been swept away and those who have been denied for decades are eligible to become citizens.

Clive Pillinger, born to an Australian, Kathleen Pillinger, in Bristol, 170km west of London, spent a lifetime falling between the gaps in Australia's citizenship laws.

The 62-year-old has just picked up his papers granting him Australian citizenship by descent.

For him, the commencement this month of the Australian Citizenship Act 2007 -- which evolved out of several government inquiries into expatriates -- marks the end of a long and emotional journey.

From an early age, Mr Pillinger dreamed of going to Australia to live and migrated to Australia in his early 20s as a "pound stg. 10 Pom". He arrived in Sydney by boat in 1968 and quickly found work as a signwriter.

But he went back to Britain in 1970 to visit his parents. By the time he got to New Zealand, he realised he had made a mistake in not getting a return visa to Australia before he left.

Mr Pillinger never lost his desire to become an Australian citizen. "There were many times over the years when I felt very down about this and thought it would never happen," he said.

Some of the now-elderly people who were denied access to citizenship were born to Australian brides who were serving overseas during World War II. Others were born while their mothers were travelling or working overseas.

Today, children born abroad to an Australian-born, Australian-citizen parent, either mother or father, may be registered as Australian citizens by descent.

But, until 1970, historical sex discrimination in Australian law meant that Australian-born women could not pass on their Australian citizenship to their overseas-born children. Such children had to have an Australian father.

Legal changes introduced in 1970 to redress this allowed only a brief opportunity for people to take out citizenship. Age restrictions also stopped many from taking out Australian citizenship.

Several thousand US-born children of World War II Australian brides born before 1949 will now be entitled to apply for Australian citizenship by descent.

Expatriate support group Southern Cross has campaigned long and hard for the changes and is now advertising widely to alert potential citizens to the changes.

Co-founder Anne MacGregor said the changes were "significant and long overdue". She estimated that about 50,000 people who had lost their Australian status in various ways, the vast majority of whom had been born in Australia, would now be eligible to resume their citizenship.

A further 30,000 born abroad of an Australian mother before 1949 would also now be eligible; as would another 15,000 born to parents who had forfeited their citizenship before their child's birth by becoming foreign citizens.

Southern Cross volunteer Jacqui Mowbray said many of the affected people felt Australian but had never been able to get their feelings acknowledged by government.