

## Parliament: from crisis to circus

Federal Parliament has become a two-ring circus, with MPs falling from the tightrope of public confidence, over a ban on their having dual-citizenship. The big question is: How many more are still holding office illegally? -- *By Don Pagé*

In a desperate move to appear to act, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has a plan. He wants all MPs to declare their status -- but only after they are elected.

A recent High Court ruling endorsed a Constitutional ban on dual citizens even standing for Parliament, but MPs are slowly being exposed after their reluctance to confess that they may have no right to be there.

MPs earn about \$200,000 a year, with more generous funding for their offices, travel and gold-plated pensions. Ministerial salaries and perks could double that, and politicians are unwilling to give them up voluntarily.

It is unclear yet whether past payments to ineligible MPs can be recovered, just as overpayment of social-welfare benefits must be returned by lesser mortals. For some politicians, that would amount to millions.

### **LOCAL MPs SILENT ON WHO KNEW WHAT**

Fellow MPs are unwilling to do in politicians still sitting in Parliament, who may be there in violation of the law. They are staying tight-lipped about what they knew while the Parliament stumbles over its own indecision.

Both MPs from Sutherland Shire were asked last Thursday to reveal if they knew of any fellow politicians who may be affected but who are remaining silent, in an email from Woronora Valley Residents Association Inc.

"Members of the House of Representatives may be concealing their citizenship status for party political reasons," observed the WVRA in a query to both Craig Kelly (Liberal), the local MP, and the Treasurer Scott Morrison (Liberal, Cook), the other Shire electorate. Neither has replied to local voters about what they knew, but both have been talking publicly about other aspects of the crisis.

Then, Liberal MP John Alexander hit the spotlight, admitting that he is finally checking whether he may be the next victim of the ban in Section 44 of the Constitution. He had been silent about his British father, since the crisis began last July, and since the High Court decision last week. ALP MP Justine Keay's eligibility has also been raised again.

A previous senator was caught out recently and had discussed with a minister his ineligibility to sit in Parliament, but both kept quiet through the current crisis.

Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott criticised the "ongoing circus", but stopped short of demanding an audit of all MPs.

### **IGNORANCE NO EXCUSE**

The Government mantra has been that it is up to the individual politician to act honourably and admit any breach – after they are elected. The argument was that it would not be democratic to force them to prove their innocence before election.

The obvious rebuttal is that only some are eligible to stand for Parliament, and that all must know the conditions applying before election. For candidates to stand illegally, knowing that they or a parent may have a foreign allegiance, defies the law. Ignorance or failure to check properly are no excuse, as the High Court has decided on October 27, at great expense.

The Government's tenuous majority is threatened by an early election, if any more of its MPs fall from the high wire. Meanwhile, a hush settles over the waiting circus.