

Citizenship mix-up leaves sons divided

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in London

Tom Johnson does not know it yet, but he is different from his three brothers.

Even though they share the same parents and were born in the same country, Tom, 2, is a little Brit. His brothers, Robbie, 5, and the newborn twins, Daniel and Andrew, are all Australians.

Because of a kink in Australian citizenship laws Tom was born when his mother, Lorraine Dearden a Sydney-born expat, had been temporarily and unwittingly stripped of her Australian citizenship by dint of gaining British nationality. He will now be eligible for Australian citizenship only if Ms Dearden and her British partner, Paul Johnson, start living in Australia. His brothers have dual nationality.

For London-based Lorraine, 41, an economist, the colour of her son's passport goes to the heart of being a parent and her life as an expat.

"I am Australian; I don't feel English and I just want my children to be treated equally. You want to give them each the same choice. It's extremely upsetting - being a mother and having your children treated differently."

Tom Johnson's cause has been taken up by the Southern Cross Group, a European-based lobby and support organisation for the estimated 1 million Australians living overseas.

"Tom [Johnson's] case is absurd," said the group's co-founder, Anne MacGregor.

"His brothers are Australian, he's being brought up an Australian, and yet he's not allowed to be an Australian."

Ms MacGregor, a Brussels-based lawyer, said there were thousands of "historical victims" of Australia's outmoded citizen-



"Foreigner" in family . . . Lorraine Dearden holds two-month-old twins Andrew and Daniel, flanked by Robbie, 5, and Tom, 2. Photo: Julian Andrews

ship laws, which, until key changes last year, prevented Australians from taking out dual nationality.

Even though it was now possible to be a dual national, Australians who lost their citizenship before the changes last April - and have no intention of returning in three years - are unable to resume nationality.

Ms MacGregor said the Government deserved credit for changing the law but had to understand that expat Australians were no less loyal to their country just because they were living overseas.

Ms Dearden, who moved to London in the early 1990s to work on a PhD, said she applied for a British passport only to make European travelling with her partner, Paul, and baby, Robbie, easier.

She gained the citizenship in early 2000 when she was six months pregnant with Tom. But when she went to register Tom at the Australian high commission

in London she was told that she and her son Robbie were no longer Australians - and Tom was ineligible.

"I am not fiercely patriotic or anything like that but I am not English," she said.

She was able to reclaim Australian citizenship for herself and Robbie by asserting that she had no idea she would lose her citizenship by becoming British. She was able to get her passport back in time for the birth of the twins. But Tom has effectively lost his birthright.

"I would never have done it if I knew what would happen," she said.

The Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, Gary Hardgrave, said he was aware of the need to clean up "the edges" of last year's citizenship changes and he hoped to find a way of "repairing" the problems affecting those like Ms Dearden.

"I want to make sure common sense prevails," he said.

"I want to find a way to fix it."