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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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The Government has decided to make 1988/89 a year of citizenship.

This will be an appropriate initiative flowing from Australia's Bicentennial year, in which all Australians have been celebrating their pride in their nationhood.

As I stressed in my Australia Day address, what makes a person an Australian is having a commitment to Australia. It is that common commitment which binds Aboriginal Australians, the Australian-born of the seventh or eighth generation and all those of their fellow-Australians born in any of the 130 countries from which our people are drawn. The commitment is all.

The ultimate expression of commitment is contained in the Oath or Affirmation of Allegiance to which a person subscribes when they take up Australian citizenship.

I know that many of the one million eligible people who are not currently citizens have a strong commitment to Australia, and that there are many reasons why people have not taken the citizenship step. For example, many people from Britain came here at a time when the difference between being a British subject and an Australian citizen was not clear.

The Government does not believe that it should force people into taking up citizenship. For that reason, we do not intend to threaten people with punitive measures if they do not take it up. To do so would demean the value of citizenship. In our free society, this must be a voluntary step taken consciously and willingly.

The correct approach is to seek to persuade as many of our fellow Australian residents as possible who are not citizens to take up citizenship. This will be the objective of the Year of Citizenship campaign.

Over the years I have attended many citizenship ceremonies. I recently attended one in my electorate at which over 100 people from 25 different nationalities showed their commitment to Australia by taking Australian citizenship.

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Like everyone else there, I found it a very moving and joyous occasion, which was clearly one of the most important nights of their lives for people who were granted citizenship at the ceremony.

On that occasion, I spoke of the importance of diversity within a united and cohesive Australia. This is exactly what multiculturalism means.

I have asked my Ministers and backbenchers to give a high priority to attending citizenship ceremonies in the future. The Government will also be looking at ways of more closely involving Local Government in the campaign.

My colleague, the Minister for Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, Clyde Holding, will develop the detailed mechanisms for the Year of Citizenship.