

The Sydney Morning Herald

News

Exclusive: Aussie Italians out in cold as Rome redefines citizenship

Rob Harris | Europe correspondent

956 words

24 May 2025

The Sydney Morning Herald

SMHH

First

34

English

© 2025 Copyright John Fairfax Holdings Limited.

Rome: For decades, Australians with Italian heritage - some named after a nonna they never met, others raised on Sunday sugo and stories of the old country - have proudly clung to the idea of becoming citizens.

For many, it was more than nostalgia. It meant opportunity - to live, work and travel freely across Europe. But that door, for thousands, has now slammed shut.

Rome had long allowed direct descendants of citizens who lived in **Italy** as far back as 1861 to apply for a passport. But Giorgia Meloni's right-wing government, elected in 2022 on a platform of national pride and conservative revivalism, has redrawn the boundaries of who gets to belong.

In March, Meloni's cabinet issued an emergency decree that dramatically tightened eligibility and this week, the law was approved by parliament. The change restricts automatic citizenship rights to those with at least one parent or grandparent born in **Italy**.

The impact has been sharply felt in Australia, where almost 180,000 people are registered as Italian citizens and tens of thousands more claim Italian ancestry, particularly from post-World War II migration.

Leaders in the Australian Italian community warn the changes risk alienating many of those who have invested significant time, effort and financial resources in reclaiming their heritage.

Andrea Acciai, a director of Patronato Acli Australia, an organisation that helps Italian migrant families with citizenship, pensions, welfare and legal issues, says about 50 Australian-Italians come to his organisation for help with citizenship claims every month. He has been flooded in recent weeks.

Acciai says it is often young people interested in travelling, studying or working in Europe and reconnecting with their roots. "Australia is full of people that are interested in the Italian citizenship ... particularly the younger generations," he says. "They love **Italy** ... they are proud of **Italy**."

The Italian government cites a system overwhelmed by soaring demand, particularly from Latin America, where private firms have profited by facilitating applications. Officials say up to 80 million people worldwide had a claim under the old rules - more than **Italy**'s current population of 59 million.

With a backlog of 60,000 pending requests, Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani declared the change essential, warning that citizenship was being treated too lightly: "Being an Italian citizen is a serious thing. It's not a game to get a passport in your pocket."

The overhaul also removes Italian consulates from the process entirely. All applications are now routed through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome, causing widespread disruption. Consular appointments have been suspended, and thousands of potential applicants - many of whom had spent years gathering documents - have found themselves shut out.

Francesco Giacobbe, an Italian senator with the country's Democratic Party, who represents its citizens living in Oceania, Asia, Africa and Antarctica, says the move risks a major rupture in **Italy**'s relationship with its global diaspora.

"The government has chosen to criminalise dual citizens and, with them, all Italians abroad," Giacobbe, who left **Italy** for Sydney in the 1980s, says. "These are the descendants of those who sacrificed everything to emigrate in search of a better future for their children. They helped build other nations, but kept Italian values and language alive."

However, Giacobbe, who led the opposition's attack on the laws, did win some last-minute concessions. Applicants already at an advanced stage in the process will remain eligible under the old rules. And following intense lobbying, the government reversed plans to exclude those who had lost their citizenship upon naturalisation in countries such as Australia because, until 1992, **Italy** did not recognise dual nationality. These individuals may now reclaim Italian citizenship.

Acciai says he understands the government's position, but argues that introducing Italian language or culture tests would have been better than just a strict cut-off at two generations.

"I had to do those things to become an Australian citizen," he says. "Citizenship should be about building a bridge and not a wall. If you're building walls, you are wrong."

Luigi Di Martino, from Com.It.Es (the Committee of Italians Abroad), says many in local communities are "disappointed" that the changes will "make it even more difficult" for the descendants of Italian immigrants to pursue citizenship claims.

He says for countless Italian descendants, citizenship is more than paperwork - a living thread connecting them to their roots, their ancestors and the values they still carry.

"We think it is a very short-sighted decision," Di Martino says. "I don't think they understand just what great ambassadors so many of the Italian community are for the country in Australia."

He says many Australians with Italian heritage are not from large Italian cities, but small villages, and return home most years, delivering an economic boost to what are often struggling communities.

Since coming to Australia, Acciai says, he has observed that the local community is perhaps "more Italian" in many ways. Using soccer as an analogy, he says there is an absence of club rivalries, with a focus on **Italy** as a collective identity, demonstrating togetherness and unity abroad.

"We don't have Juventus, Inter, Milan here," he says. "We have only **Italy** ... and you see that with the Azzuri [**Italy**'s national soccer team] shirts."

He says many feel the broader message from Rome is bitterly clear. At a time when **Italy** faces a demographic crisis - marked by an ageing population and declining birth rates - the government is turning away descendants of Italians abroad who have preserved language, culture and identity for generations.

"Citizenship is not just a legal status ... It's a recognition ... that you belong, you matter," Acciai says.

Document SMHH000020250523el5o0001u

Search Summary

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Text | italy |
| Date | In the last 3 months |
| Source | Group: Newspapers: Major Aust. |
| Author | All Authors |
| Company | All Companies |
| Subject | All Subjects |
| Industry | All Industries |
| Region | All Regions |
| Language | All Languages |
| News Filters | Source: The Sydney Morning Herald - All sources |
| Results Found | 247 |
| Timestamp | 27 May 2025 11:51 |