

International

Australia's High Court sits to resolve MPs' citizenship crisis

'Citizenship seven' face court in political saga

CANBERRA: Australia's High Court began a three-day hearing yesterday to determine the eligibility of seven lawmakers who may hold dual citizenship, a case that could determine whether the government is able to maintain its razor-thin majority. Australia's parliament was rocked by revelations in August that the seven politicians, including the deputy prime minister and two other Cabinet members in Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's coalition government, are dual citizens.

That means they are potentially ineligible to hold elected office under Australia's constitution. Turnbull's unpopular centre-right government holds just a one-seat majority in parliament, meaning its future could rest on the outcome of the citizenship crisis. The seven lawmakers accept they were dual nationals at the time of their election last year but the government argues that five of them, including all three Cabinet members, should be cleared because they were unaware that they had contravened the constitutional requirement at the time.

Australian Solicitor-General Stephen Donaghue urged the seven justices of the High Court not to interpret the constitution literally. Donaghue said instead the constitution should only disqualify politicians if they had prior knowledge that they may be dual citizens but did not take

"reasonable steps" to investigate and renounce their second citizenship where needed. A ruling could come as soon as Thursday.

Should the High Court rule Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, the sole lower house lawmaker caught up in the crisis, is ineligible, Turnbull will then need to win the support of one of three independent lawmakers to keep his minority government. Joyce acquired dual citizenship from his New Zealand-born father. He said in a submission to the court he believed that his father had renounced his New Zealand citizenship before he was born. He did not know until he was 10 that his father was still a New Zealand citizen, Joyce said.

Ruling to determine whether govt can keep the majority

Turnbull's government is already in a minority in the upper house Senate and, should the High Court disqualify all seven lawmakers, he will face a government reshuffle after losing two more Cabinet members who are senators. Support for Turnbull continues to languish near a six-month low, but political analysts believe he might receive a boost if he is able to win passage of a same-sex marriage bill. Turnbull's government won High Court approval last month to stage a non-binding postal survey on the issue, which is widely popular among Australians. Results of that poll will be announced on Nov 15. — Reuters



SYDNEY: A cruise liner is seen docked in Sydney harbor yesterday. — AFP

Tokyo's popular governor, Japan PM trade barbs

TOKYO: Tokyo's popular governor Yuriko Koike and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe traded barbs yesterday as the gloves came off for the official start of a snap election campaign in the world's third-largest economy. Conservative premier Abe, 63, is facing an unexpected and fierce challenge from the media-savvy Koike, who has upended the sleepy world of Japanese politics with her upstart "Party of Hope."

Addressing hundreds of commuters at a busy Tokyo station via loudspeaker, Koike called on supporters to "end the politics of Abe," lashing out at the long-serving premier over recent scandals that have weighed on his popularity. "The political status quo has continued while politics itself has lost the public's confidence," charged the former TV anchorwoman, 65.

Abe cut a contrasting figure by kicking off his offensive in the bucolic farming country of Fukushima, signaling his commitment to rebuilding the region hard hit by the 2011 nuclear power plant meltdown. He pledged a major expansion of social programs, including offering free early-childhood education in a bid to get more women into work, while also talking tough on North Korea. In an obvious dig at Koike, he urged voters to consider his policies, rather than catchy soundbites. "Slogans do not open the way to the future. Policies unlock the future. We must not lose," he said.

The 12-day campaign will be fought around reviving Japan's once world-beating economy and the ever-present threat of North Korea which has threatened to "sink" the country into the sea. Koike's "Party of Hope" has swallowed up and replaced most of the main opposition party in the space of a week, transforming Japan's staid political landscape. But surveys suggest her bandwagon is grinding



TOKYO: Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (left) gestures as he answers questions beside Tokyo Governor and head of the Party of Hope Yuriko Koike during a debate. — AFP

to a halt as she refuses to run herself for PM in the election, focusing on stewarding the world's most populous city with three years until Tokyo hosts the Olympic Games.

A poll in the top-selling Yomiuri daily suggested that 32 percent of voters plan to vote for Abe's conservative LDP with 13 percent for the Party of Hope down six percentage points from the previous poll in late September. On the streets of Tokyo, Abe's message that the election is about the coming generations appeared to resonate. "At my age, what interests me is the future of my children and my grandchildren. We need to prepare a better world for them," said 76-year-old pensioner Sumiko Sakai.

Referendum on Abe

Abe is seeking a fresh term at the helm of the Asian economic powerhouse and key US regional ally and unexpectedly called a snap election to capitalize on a weak and fractured opposition. But Koike stole his limelight by

launching her party, attacking Abe's government for being too slow to reform the country, weighed down by an ageing population, deflation and a huge debt mountain. Abe's trademark "Abenomics" policy—a vow to kick deflation and achieve two-percent inflation with stable growth—has largely fallen flat. Critics argue that Abe called the early election to divert attention from a string of scandals, including allegations of favoritism to a friend in a business deal—which the premier strongly denies.

And analysts say the October 22 vote is effectively a referendum on Abe, who has enjoyed unrivalled political strength for the past five years in part because of a lack of credible opposition, while his key policies remained controversial or unpopular. For her part, Koike says her new group promotes "compassionate conservatism" and hopes to distinguish herself from Abe by pledging a phase-out of nuclear power by 2030 and a freeze on a planned sales tax hike. —AFP

Could an independent Catalonia stay in EU?

BRUSSELS: Catalan leaders say they want to remain part of the European Union in the event of independence from Spain, but the path to continuing membership or rejoining the bloc is not clear. Brussels has stuck to its line that an independent Catalonia would automatically be out and have to reapply to join, but some experts say pragmatism may yet trump dogma.

Recognizing Catalonia

The October 1 referendum produced a 90 percent vote for secession, but because it was held in defiance of Spain's Constitutional Court rulings that it was unlawful, from the EU's point of view it amounts to a deeply flawed mandate. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has made it clear Brussels would only respect a vote for independence if it was held in line with the Spanish constitution. EU members "will not recognize Catalonia as a state if it is created in violation of the law and particularly the Spanish constitution", said Jean-Claude Piris, an expert in European law.

Prodi doctrine

The EU's treaties do not specifically state what happens if part of a member state secedes, but since 2004 the commission has stuck to the "Prodi doctrine", named after former president Romano Prodi. This says that a region breaking away from a member state would automatically cease to be part of the EU on the day of its independence, and would have to follow the usual membership process to rejoin. Membership talks for Catalonia would likely be different from those currently under way for candidate countries such as the Balkan states and Turkey, which have to harmonize their legislation and foreign policy as well as bring human rights standards up to EU standards.

Catalonia has sought to get ahead on this point by



People with Catalan flags gather during a rally in Barcelona yesterday. — AP

passing a law last month that said all EU laws would apply in its territory even if it was no longer a member. Questions have also been raised about the legal solidity of the Prodi doctrine and whether the relevant treaty clauses could be open to different interpretation. A European Commission spokesman said Friday that "this is the way we read the treaty, this is our position" but acknowledged that "everybody has his or her right to his or her own opinion".

Room for pragmatism?

Senior French judge Yves Gounin warned in a 2014 article on independence movements that taking a headline approach—kicking a newly seceded territory out of the bloc—could backfire on the EU. "Europe would have every-

thing to lose by putting these states in quarantine its investors could no longer invest there, its young people could not study there, its workers could not move freely," Gounin wrote. Instead, he suggested that "realism" should trump "orthodoxy", arguing that "the most reasonable solution would be to negotiate independence and EU membership simultaneously". But something like a precedent for this exists from the Scottish referendum of 2014 - which was held with London's blessing—and it is not promising for Catalan separatists. To avoid a rupture, the Scottish government said that in the event of a "yes" vote, it would start pre-independence talks with the EU "to settle the terms of an independent Scotland's continuing membership". —AFP

News in brief

Trump teases Tillerson

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump has dismissed reports that Rex Tillerson once called him a "moron"—but just to make it clear that he's smarter than his secretary of state he has suggested taking IQ tests to prove it. Last week, Tillerson was forced to deny an NBC News report that he had called the president a moron after a July meeting at the Pentagon, holding a news conference to insist: "He's smart." Nevertheless, something about the incident still seems to bother Trump, who was due to have lunch with Tillerson at the White House later yesterday. "I think it's fake news," Trump told Forbes magazine. "But if he did that, I guess we'll have to compare IQ tests. And I can tell you who is going to win." The report came just days after Trump upbraided the former ExxonMobil CEO for "wasting his time" trying to negotiate with North Korea.

18 Yemeni rebels killed

ADEN: Eighteen Yemeni rebels have been killed in fighting around the Saudi border over the past 24 hours, Yemeni army officers said yesterday. Clashes flared this week around the Red Sea port of Mudi and the nearby Saudi border town of Huthaira, spilling over into the rebel heartland of Saada inland. The Yemeni army officers said loyalist forces had managed to wrest control of several rebel-held towns straddling the border. Saudi officials contacted by AFP did not respond to requests for comment. The rebels control most of northern Yemen, including the Red Sea coast. But the government controls several pockets near the Saudi border, including the port of Mudi. A Saudi-led coalition intervened in support of the government in 2015. More than 8,500 civilians have since been killed, with both sides in the conflict being accused of not doing enough to avoid civilian casualties.

Islamist leaders nabbed

DHAKA: Bangladesh police have detained several top leaders of the country's largest Islamist party in a crackdown against the opposition that the government blames for inciting militancy but which says it is being unfairly targeted. Eight leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami, including party chief Maqbul Ahmad and secretary general Shafiqur Rahman, were detained in Dhaka on Monday night, police said. They were formally arrested yesterday and ordered held on remand for 10 days while police investigate. The detentions followed information that the leaders were meeting "to plot and carry out some destructive activities", a senior police official said. Jamaat-e-Islami denied the allegations and called for demonstrations on Tuesday to protest. It said in a statement that its leaders were in an informal meeting. "The government is continuously arresting our innocent activists just to stay in power," the party said. The detentions follow a years-long crackdown on the opposition by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government and come ahead of general elections expected next year.

Thieves rob jewelers

LONDON: A band of thieves smashed their way into a royal jewelers in central London on Monday evening, making off on mopeds with a valuable haul, police said. The gang used weapons including an axe and bats to break into Mappin and Webb jewelers on Regent Street, in the heart of London's shopping district. A trio of thieves stole "a high value of jewelry items" while three accomplices "waited outside on revved-up scooters throughout the raid", London's Metropolitan Police said in a statement. The force did not give a figure for total losses at Mappin and Webb, where numerous pieces of jewelry run into the tens of thousands of pounds (dollars, euros). The high-end store has been a supplier to the British royal family for more than a century and the company's master craftsman is the custodian of the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London. After the raid the mopeds sped off in separate directions, with one racing towards Oxford Street before crashing into a female pedestrian who was not seriously injured.