NEW laws to allow the use of biometric technology in passports, along with tougher penalties for passport fraud, were passed by the House of Representatives today. The measures raise maximum penalties for passport fraud to 10 years jail or a $110,000 fine. They also allow the use of biometric technology to make passports more secure, set out new grounds for passports to be refused or cancelled and allow serial passport losers to be penalised.

The measures will now be debated in the Senate.

Although supporting the measures, Labor's foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd criticised the loss of hundreds of new passports through the mail. "It doesn't take a large number of people, using travel documents, to bring about a terrorist event," Mr Rudd said.

"...It is an extraordinary indictment of wrong priorities in an age of terrorism that this could have occurred, whereby we still, today, have 355 missing Australian passports, in large part because of a system which was introduced by the government to save money."

Liberal backbencher Bruce Baird said the missing passports, although a concern, should be put in context. With one million passports issued each year, the 355 represented only 0.03 per cent of the total.

Mr Baird said the 32,479 lost or missing passports last year were a greater concern. "Some people seem to have a habit of losing them," he said.

Mr Baird said a secure passport was vital to Australians, who were such big travellers. He said 40 per cent of Australians held passports, compared with 20 per cent of Americans.

Labor's immigration spokesman Stephen Smith said biometric technology, which allows identity to be confirmed at border posts through fingerprints or eye scanning, could be used more widely than passports.

Mr Smith said about 60,000 people were in Australia illegally at any given time, with about half of them working.

Biometrics could be incorporated into a foreign workers' card to help crack down on illegal workers, he said. AAP

This report appears on australianIT.com.au.