



Committee Secretary
Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Email:

Submission – Inquiry into Auditor-General’s Report (No. 25) - Efficiency of the Processing of Applications for Citizenship by Conferral, and the Effects on People

The Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the national peak body representing Australia’s culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and their organisations.

FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency to Government and the broader community. FECCA strives to ensure that the needs and aspirations of Australians from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are given proper recognition in public policy.

FECCA supports multiculturalism, community harmony, social justice and the rejection of all forms of discrimination and racism to build a productive and culturally rich Australian society. FECCA’s policies are developed around the concepts of empowerment and inclusion and are formulated with the common good of all Australians in mind.

FECCA would welcome the opportunity to expand on this submission as required. For enquiries please contact FECCA Acting CEO Mohammad Al-Khafaji

Recommendations

1. Provide transparency of wait time and clear communication and expectations to applicants
2. Create a fast track application process for those on compassionate grounds (visiting sick family)
3. Value Australian Citizenship and permanency as a key to social cohesion by ensuring clear pathways to permanency for all visa types
4. Create safeguards to ensure no delays occur in the future and invest in programs encouraging eligible permanent residents to take up Australian citizenship.
5. Legislate a reasonable timeframe that treats applicants fairly and accounts for the negative impacts of delays in citizenship processing.

Discussion

During consultations this year with communities across Australia, FECCA heard questions like 'Why does it take so long to get citizenship?' and comments about the impact of citizenship like 'Our community come here for greener pastures and have been giving their best and not expecting much in return. One way of appreciating then is by offering citizenship and a welcome to community.'

The ability to participate fully in Australian life is dependent upon citizenship status. The right to vote; the right to ease of travel; the right to serve your country in jobs reserved for citizens such as the public sector; the right to decide how the financial contributions one makes to the country are distributed; and access to improved opportunities for education for a person and their children are an important part of integration. For many, Australian citizenship is essential to belonging, especially for humanitarian migrants. For them becoming an Australian citizen is a dream come true, and this is even more important for those who were stateless before coming to Australia (eg. Karen community) as their existence have never been recognized elsewhere especially the country where they were born.

It is the view of FECCA, and the tradition of Australia's immigration system, that Australian permanent residents should seek citizenship as soon as practically possible to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging and encourage integration.

For migrants to Australia, the granting of Australian citizenship is a symbol of welcoming into the Australian community and provides security and certainty. It has encouraged many migrants not just to see Australia as the place where they live, but to see themselves as Australian, regardless of country of origin. Citizenship is not only an offer of welcome by Australia; it is also an expression of commitment by the migrant.

The Efficiency of the Processing of Applications for Citizenship by Conferral Auditor-General's Report (The Report) revealed that this process is no longer working. In many cases the people affected by these delays will have already lived here for many years, working, studying and contributing to the economic and social fabric of the nation. These delays are unacceptable by community expectations given the positive impact Australian citizenship has on peoples lives and the effect on wellbeing of those waiting for approval.

Once citizenship applications are finally processed and approved, FECCA heard that for example in Adelaide it may take another 6 months for the actual ceremony to occur, further delaying their now adult children from going to university.

Australia; a Desirable Destination

This year FECCA heard from a newly arrived surgeon that 'Citizenship is appreciated by the community. If the wait time was extended, highly skilled migrants might leave, and it would discourage further people from coming. People want something better for themselves and their children, but if they see increasing hurdles this will discourage them.' This sentiment was repeated by many who felt they may have chosen to migrate to a different country had they known the long journey that was ahead of them.

Wellbeing

'Without citizenship there is no permanency or stability. Choosing a school for our children or buying a house will be delayed. People will not settle if there is no certainty.' FECCA heard the uncertainty and anxiety caused by the long process from entry to permanent residency (PR) to citizenship. These people could not make long, or even medium term, plans.

The FECCA consultations highlighted constant worry and anxiety for people whilst they wait to be eligible for citizenship and for their applications to be assessed. The lack of communication and clear timeframes contributes to this stress. People cannot effectively settle into their new homes without certainty with many asking why the process was taking so long.

Intergenerational Disadvantage

During consultations, FECCA heard that a priority for getting Australian Citizenship is to ensure parents can send their now adult children to university. Without citizenship, they will be charged international student fees and have no access to HECS-HELP study loans (HELP) despite working, contributing and paying taxes in Australia for an extended period of time.

FECCA also heard about 'a major gap in the journey to citizenship and a huge amount of money to be spent' further intrenching this disadvantage.

The Report noted the number of people waiting extraordinarily long periods for decisions to be made. The impact on these people impacts this country, its productivity, its culture and its values. These delays need to be addressed and safeguards should be created to ensure no further delays in the future.

FECCA acknowledges that the Department of Home Affairs have been allocating resources to ensure the backlog of citizenship applications are processed in timely manner.