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Ms Sonia Palmieri  
Inquiry Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Palmieri

The Community Relations Commission For a multicultural NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Joint Standing Committee's Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education.

The inquiry is particularly pertinent to the Commission because one of its legislated functions is to "encourage eligible people to become Australian citizens".

Members of the Joint Standing Committee may be aware that, in recognition of the fact a narrow, legal and formal understanding of the concept of citizenship was becoming outmoded in the face of globalisation and rapid change, the NSW *Community Relations and Principles of Multiculturalism Act 2000* included a definition of citizenship which states that, in the context of the Act:

*"The expression citizenship is not limited to formal Australian citizenship, but refers to the rights and responsibilities of all people in a multicultural society in which there is:*

- (a) a recognition of the importance of shared values within a democratic framework governed by the rule of law, and*
- (b) a unifying commitment to Australia, its interests and future."*

This understanding of citizenship underlies the NSW Principles of Multiculturalism, which are the policy of the State, and are required to be observed by all NSW public authorities. The Principles include a recognition that English is the common language of Australia, and underlies the legal and institutional framework of the nation.

The study of civics and citizenship has been embedded in the appropriate syllabi by the NSW Board of Studies, and is implemented by the NSW Department of Education and Training, at two levels:

- at the Primary School level through the inclusion of Civics and Citizenship in the Human Society and Its Environment syllabus, and

- at the junior Secondary School level by being embedded in the Years 7 – 10 History and Geography syllabi, with a mandatory test of Australian Geography, History, Civics and Citizenship as part of the NSW School Certificate, for all Year 10 students

The Commission is of the view that, within an already over-crowded curriculum, Civics Education is significantly addressed within NSW schools through these measures.

There may, however, be scope for further public and community education initiatives to be undertaken within school, and outside the school system by other agencies and organisations.

In particular, the Commission refers to the recommendations on civics education in the proposed national action plan to build on the principles agreed at the meeting with Islamic community leaders, which was put to the Special Council of Australian Governments' Meeting on Counter-Terrorism, on 27 September 2005.

However, the Commission believes that the funding necessary for such initiatives is essentially a Federal responsibility.

The Commission notes that in a recent (27 April 2006) speech to the Sydney Institute, the Hon Andrew Robb AO MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs identified the acquisition of a functional level of English as fundamental to accessing not only education, but also employment, which he argued was central to fostering the integration of immigrants into Australian society.

While the Commission has reservations about the value of revisiting the outmoded concept of “integration”, it concurs fully that the acquisition of a functional level of English is fundamental to a new arrival’s capacity to access education and employment.

While the current Federal administration clearly hopes that applications for immigration will come mainly from people who already have a functional grasp of English, the reality is that the bulk of applicants (even within the “skilled migrant” group) will come from non-OECD countries, and have limited English proficiency.

The Commission also has strong reservations about the concept that the acquisition of Australian citizenship should depend on passing a language test.

However, if acquisition of citizenship is to be dependent on a test of English language proficiency, the Commission is strongly of the view that action will need to be taken to ensure that people desiring to undertake the test are also given appropriate and adequate opportunities to learn English.

This is particularly so because Australia stands to benefit not only from the greater contribution to the workforce that can be made by English proficient workers, but also from the improvement in community harmony that would flow from better communication and dialogue.

In its 2001 publication, *Australian Citizenship ... A Common Bond*, the Commonwealth Government undertook to: “continue to encourage civics and citizenship education in the Australian community and will pursue further initiatives through the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP)” (p 6).

While noting that the 2006 Federal budget makes some additional provision for English language provision, the Commission considers that the Commonwealth has fallen far short of fulfilling its 2001 undertaking, and that funding for English language provision overall has in fact declined.

Irrespective of whether English language proficiency should be the basis of acquiring citizenship, an improvement in the “electoral education of migrant citizens” can only be achieved by the provision of adequate English language learning opportunities. Such provision could only improve the capacity of new arrivals to access education, training and employment, and adjust to the values, mores and electoral systems of Australia.

Yours sincerely

Stepan Kerkyasharian AM  
**Chairperson**  
**Community Relations Commission**