

To the Senate Committee inquiring into the Australian Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2007.

It is encouraging to see that the Federal Senate is inquiring into the Australian Citizenship Amendment (Citizenship Testing) Bill, 2007. It seems that the proposed amendment would be quite destructive to the highly successful current conditions for citizenship that have served Australia well for about 40 years. We have become proud of our multicultural society over that time and immigrants have been proud to become citizens of such a welcoming society.

The introduction of formal tests to this process necessarily changes it entirely. The purpose of a test is to differentiate between people, so we would be no longer welcoming the new arrivals (NB entering with Australian approval) into our community; we would be forcing them to prove their worthiness to become one of us.

The Government should be reluctant to change its welcoming process into a confronting one. There would appear to be no reason why such a change should occur unless the Government has altered its view on the kind of society it wants.

Apart from that fundamental objection to the changes, the kind of testing seems quite inadequate, perhaps irrelevant, to its apparent purpose: to establish the applicant's worthiness to be a citizen of this country.

Examples of the kind of questions that would be asked of applicants have been an odd collection of snippets of Australian history and general knowledge with no regard to the bias involved in many of them. The questions about "Australian values" are highly debateable. They seem to imply that if it is a 'good' value it must be 'Australian'; other countries must have the rest. That is hardly welcoming to people from other countries.

Many of the questions seem to miss the fact that Australia has a culturally diverse society but arise from an assumption that it is an English (perhaps British) outpost as it was pre-Second World War at least.

There would be a necessary discrimination in those tests against anyone from a non-English speaking background. Is that part of the purpose of the tests?

The proposal to extend the time in Australia from about two years to four before someone could apply for citizenship has the potential for unnecessary hardship for those people. Many will have family members in distant places, some in disastrous environments, for whom they could not make immigration applications for that extended period of time. That seems unnecessarily harsh and one wonders why this should become a feature at this time.

That is not to deny that a proficiency in English is not important for Australian citizens but that is a matter of education, not testing. The considerable amount of money spent on setting up the proposed testing would be far more productively spent on extending the availability of English education for new arrivals. They would then learn about – and contribute to – the development of Australian values.

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