

## **IF YOU SAT A CITIZENSHIP TEST, WOULD YOU PASS?**

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Are you fit to be an Australian citizen? Is it time that you thought about moving to another country?

The Howard Government says that people wanting to be an Australian citizen should sit a test. It would cover topics like our history, symbols, values and system of government. But, how would Australians go at the same test? Do you know our national floral emblem (golden wattle) or our national gemstone (the opal)?

Can you do more than mutter our national anthem? Most of us remember that "We've golden soil and wealth for toil" and that "Our home is girt by sea", but what about the mysterious second verse? I'll give a hint, it begins "Beneath our radiant Southern Cross, We'll toil with hearts and hands".

Then we get to the hard stuff. See how you go with these questions:

- 1: Do we have a written Constitution?
- 2: What is Australia's top court?
- 3: Does Australia have a bill of rights?
- 4: When did Aboriginal people get the vote?

The answers later.

Many if not most Australians would fail a test on our history, law and government. In fact, even when we think we know much about them, the information may actually come from the U.S. Our knowledge all too often comes from their TV shows like Law and Order rather than from our time at school.

I see this first-hand in the classroom through teaching Australia's best and brightest law students. They may get over 99 in their final school exams, but they can fail to answer some of the most basic questions.

To the answers. Yes, we do have a written Constitution. This is despite a survey taken in 1987 for the Constitutional Commission that found that 47 per cent of Australians were unaware of this.

Australia's top court is the High Court. Unfortunately, a 1994 report on citizenship by the Civics Expert Group found that more than a quarter of those surveyed nominated the Supreme Court instead. This is, of course, the name of the top court in the U.S.

Australia certainly does not have a bill of rights, yet most of us think that we do. A Roy Morgan poll taken for Amnesty International in July this year found that 61 per cent of us mistakenly believe that Australia has a bill of rights. If the U.S. has one, it seems that people think so do we.

This survey revealed even higher levels of error than earlier surveys. If anything, levels of knowledge have got worse. Most Australians think that Aboriginal people got the vote in 1967 as a result of the referendum that changed the Constitution. That referendum did delete sections that discriminated against them. However, they got the vote five years before when the law was changed by the Menzies government in 1962.

If you are like many Australians, the odds are that you did poorly. This shows why more education about Australian government and history is needed.

One of the reasons why governments fail to do their job is because people do not know enough to hold politicians to account. Where people do not understand how things work, it can be easier for our elected representatives to avoid scrutiny and to deflect blame.

It would be good for new citizens to have this knowledge. However, before we ask it of them, we also should take a hard look at ourselves. New citizens should know how our systems work, but so should we.

We need more investment in education to make sure that not only new, but also current citizens, have the information they need to be good Australians.

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