

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Australian Citizen (Citizenship Testing) Bill 2007

The Darebin Ethnic Communities Council (DECC) welcomes the Senate Enquiry and is pleased to comment on the Bill. The comments that follow were raised by community representatives of migrant and refugee communities affiliated with the DECC and based in the north east suburbs of Melbourne. The City of Darebin has been a place of harmonious and productive settlement by people from Europe, the Middle East, Asia and most recently from Africa. The diverse community that makes up this municipality is living witness to the success of Australia's migration program from World War 2 to the present. Our daily experience of this diverse yet integrated community is the basic reason why we oppose any major changes to the current way in which people become Australian citizens.

In our view, the need for a higher level citizenship test to achieve greater integration of newcomers into Australian society has not been demonstrated up until now. The fact that there is so little detail about the content of the Citizenship Test in the Bill adds to our concern regarding its value and purpose. The lack of detail can be interpreted as providing government with a highly discretionary instrument with which to exclude the applications of some individuals for citizenship, along the lines of the infamous dictation test.

We have particular concerns regarding the impact of the Bill on many of our recently settled refugees and those in the family reunion category. Often these people have limited literacy and education and may take many years, if ever, to pass an English test. Others will face unnecessary hardship through having to wait at least two years longer to be able to travel to family members in other parts of the world. It seems incongruous that on the one hand we welcome refugees and encourage them to settle and on the other we continue to make them insecure and marginalized.

Our final comment relates to the "Values" component of the Test. Australia's continuing social cohesion would be far better served, if the resources required to develop and administer this were re-allocated to community education that countered bigotry and racism.

Yours sincerely,

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Chairperson DECC.

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