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Jackie Morris  
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Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs  
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Dear Ms Morris

**RE: Inquiry into Australian Citizenship Amendment (Citizenship Testing) Bill 2007**

**1. Thanks for the invitation**

As the Founder of Newcomers Network, Australia's first online network for newcomers that started in 1999, I would like to thank you for your letter dated 14 June 2007 inviting me to make a submission to the above Parliamentary Inquiry.

**2. What I will cover**

As mentioned in my submission to the Citizenship Taskforce for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs dated 17 November 2006, I have previously commented on the benefits and challenges of implementing an Australian Citizenship Test. This paper will provide a summary of the pros and cons and suggestions on options for consideration now that the next part of the process has occurred.

**3. Methodology**

I am well aware of the referenced comments provided in other submissions and appreciate the efforts of the various authors in verifying the validity of their arguments.

I speak in this paper fully cognizant of the vagaries of Australian bureaucracy and the machinations of political parties and have attempted, wherever possible, to encapsulate pragmatic and forthright policy and procedure suggestions that can be easily implemented within current frameworks. Unfortunately I do not have the luxury of time to provide appropriate references for all of my suggestions and comments.

Although democratic processes are available to all Australians, final decisions will always include some form of compromise as the needs of all groups cannot be met. For

this reason, I have included arguments that are 'outside' the direct topic of citizenship. I sense that some comments in the past on this topic have 'blamed' a proposed Australian Citizenship Test for creating more challenges for refugees and migrants. I see several advantages.

In an effort to make this easy to read or scan by the majority of competent but time poor English readers, I have reduced my comments wherever possible to dot points. The irony is that for people with lower level English skills, they may not be able to understand what I have said and indeed, they may not have contributed because of their own lack of knowledge of this process or their English skills.

#### **4. Further input and previous associations**

I am happy to appear before the Standing Committee in person if you would like to ask further questions. I have not been involved in the development of the Bill or consulted directly with any Government Department in relation to Australian Citizenship Testing. I have in the past encouraged newcomers to become Australian Citizens as I believe it is an important step on their settlement journey and have provided information packs directly to them.

I have also provided submissions to other Senate Enquiries and Government Departments on issues related to Australian Expatriates, Employment and Small Business, Racial and Religious Tolerance and Multicultural Victoria. I have also been a Living in Harmony Initiative Ambassador in 2006. I am not a past or current member of any political party. My main focus is always on improving the opportunities for people to settle effectively in Australia.

#### **5. The 'pros' or advantages of introducing an Australian Citizenship Test**

5.1 As there was strong support for it in the Initial Public Consultation Process, it appears that the general Australian public do see the merits

5.2 I imagine that the merit is based on the perception that a written/online assessment process has more validity than a personal interview (which is the current testing process)

5.3 By sourcing a standard set of 200 questions, there will be a base reference point for people to learn more about civic life and various aspects Australian living and history.

5.4 As the test would be completed before applying for Australian Citizenship, I presume that there is no cost to do the test?

5.5 There are many other tests and forms that newcomers must complete in Australia, in English – for instance, driving tests, Medicare, Australian Taxation Office etc and with four years of living in Australia, they should have a reasonable level of English Language Skills

5.6 The personal identifying items can also be used for their Australian Passport Application

5.7 Most of the people living in Australia who have chosen not to become Australian Citizens already speak good English (coming from the United Kingdom and New Zealand). These people would not find it difficult to complete the test based on their English ability (but perhaps on their memory and learning skills)

5.8 With a more formal process in place, there may be an increase in the perception of 'nation building.' The general community may see that it takes personal effort to achieve a pass

5.9 Most teachers will tell you that if something is going to be assessed, people will take a lot more interest in learning the information than if the material is not going to be assessed

5.10 The change from two to four years is an acknowledgement that new arrivals are a 'newcomer' for quite a while. I usually suggest that it takes at least three years to feel like a 'local'. This may have the added advantage of encouraging longer term projects to help new arrivals settle more effectively in Australia (not quick fixes). Other countries have five year minimums

5.11 It is harder to be 'extreme' if people understand what 'mainstream' is. An Australian Citizenship Test is not a panacea against terrorism – no single initiative will ever solve this concern

5.12 There are many written regulations in Australia – and these have been implemented to create a safer community – even if in perception alone

5.13 It is my personal hope that this will increase the personal accountability of English Language training providers and that the standards across all services will improve and more access will be granted to ensure that people receive their full 510 hours or more if they need it (ie childcare for women etc)

5.14 The implementation of an Australian Citizenship Test will continue to create public debate and community involvement and I hope help define the common understandings of life in Australia

## **6. The 'cons' or challenges facing the introduction of an Australian Citizenship Test**

6.1 As the 'Minister' seems to be the only person responsible for approving the final test, citizenship decisions and special cases, I am concerned that it may be used for party political purposes and would prefer to see either an independent or bipartisan approach used so that the entire process remains transparent

6.2 I am concerned that the cost of implementing the test will exceed the revenue collected from people applying for Australian Citizenship (although the initial costs will obviously be higher). The total cost has also doubled for intending citizens from \$120 to \$240 and this may cause hardship for some applicants.

6.3 There does not appear to be any special dispensation for people with low levels of literacy or ability to complete the Australian Citizenship Test (eg a learning difficulty, severe trauma etc)

6.4 Personal identifiers requested for this process would need strict privacy control methods and perhaps be limited to no more than two of the total number listed

6.5 It does not fully address living or settlement issues and it does not appear to focus on the essential skills that Australian Citizens need for everyday life (although some would argue that they need this before they have lived in Australia for four years)

6.6 I am making these comments without seeing the test, the questions, the format etc so I am effectively making arguments against something that doesn't currently exist. I think it should be designed with universal values, not separate 'Australian' values which may be promoted by the government of the day

6.7 Although applicants can pass a test, it does not mean that they have or will adopt the principles it encourages, the values it seeks to define or have competent English skills for everyday living

6.8 It may generate a rise in profiteers who will seek to charge extra money for educational services to help people pass the Australian Citizenship Test

6.9 It effectively delays the process of obtaining an Australian Passport

6.10 It does not test the standard of English that the applicant currently has. It has been my experience that people with a strong accent and poor pronunciation are often discriminated against, even if they have excellent English skills and the testing process will not reveal this level of competency

## **7. Suggestions for consideration**

Apart from the comments including in both the 'pros and cons' in sections 5 and 6 of this paper, I would also like to add:

7.1 Have the Australian Citizenship Testing material open and available online so that intending migrants, schools, service providers etc can access this information

7.2 I am concerned that the process of making a submission to this Inquiry is difficult for people with low levels of English and I have not seen many submissions from people representing refugees and less skilled migrants. This process needs to be improved for all Standing Committees and more information available in plain English (not just copies of legal looking documents). Multilingual options with standard forms to 'fill in the blanks' would also be helpful

7.3 Where will the Citizenship Ceremonies be held? At the Citizenship Testing Centres or at local venues in special ceremonies as they are now? This has not been mentioned.

7.4 Whilst Australian Citizenship Testing is a development, I sincerely hope that it is the start of a variety of new initiatives designed to improve settlement outcomes for all new arrivals, improved English Language training and assessment and living skills training (in particular online/internet based accessibility and learning)

End

1601 Words



**Submission by Ms Sue Ellson BBus, AIMM, MAHRI**

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**Australia's first and largest online guide for newcomers**

**Started in 1999**

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