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Committee Secretary
Senate Legal & Constitutional Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

Inquiry into the Australian Citizenship Amendment (Citizenship Testing) Bill 2007

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to this inquiry. I attach as a supplement 'If you sat a Citizenship Test, would you Pass?' *Adelaide Advertiser* (13 December 2006). A version of the article was also published in the *Herald Sun*, *Hobart Mercury*, *Canberra Times* and *Daily Telegraph*.

I do not oppose the idea that people should undertake a test as a prerequisite to becoming an Australian citizen. I recognise that such tests are seen as normal in many other nations, including the United Kingdom. Indeed, I strongly support measures to improve the knowledge new Australians have about our system of government and our values, as well as measures that might improve this within the existing body of Australian citizens.

I do, however, have concerns about this Bill and the utility of enacting it. My concern is that the test will create extra costs for government and a bureaucratic impediment to becoming a citizen without actually providing the desired benefits.

First, as the second reading speech makes clear an object of introducing the test is to promote a 'common set of values'. Unfortunately, a test of this kind is an ineffective way of instilling

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values. Not only is it almost impossible to draft questions (particularly multi-choice questions) that test concepts like values but the values themselves are far more nuanced and complex than can ever be assessed in a formal examination. In any event, someone who fundamentally disagreed with Australian values could pass the citizenship test by correctly identifying the answers even if they do not have a personal commitment to the values that the answers express.

Second, tests of this kind tend not to be effective in building genuine, long term understanding and knowledge. My experience as an educator is that it is inevitable that a test of this kind will be prepared for by applicants rote-learning a body of information to provide the desired answers. This form of surface learning can lead to information being held only for the short period of time over which the test is taken. Unless the information is reinforced after the test it will simply be a procedural barrier for applicants to overcome and the information memorised may be quickly forgotten. Memorising information does not equate with actually understanding it. Hence, a test of this kind may not, to again quote the second reading speech, ensure that 'Australian citizens understand the values that guide us and how our society works'.

Third, the second reading speech says that the test will 'cover the sorts of things that people learn in their primary and secondary years at school'. While Australian children now cover this material at school, my experience as an educator is that they often have little or no recollection of it. As Sophie Mirabella MP, chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, said in the Foreword to the Committee's report into *Civics and Electoral Education* (May 2007): 'surveys have shown that Australians between the ages of 15 and 35 typically have limited knowledge of Australia's political history and political system, and have little interest in Australian political affairs'. The attached newspaper article also suggests the level of knowledge of Australians about important aspects of how they are governed and their history is poor. I am concerned about setting the threshold of knowledge for new citizens at a higher level than is the case for current citizens.

For example, a 1987 survey conducted for the Constitutional Commission found that 47 per cent of Australians were unaware that Australia has a written constitution. Similarly, the 1994 report of the Civics Expert Group found that only 18 per cent of Australians have some understanding of what their constitution contains. These findings were reinforced by a survey taken in 2006. Amnesty International Australia commissioned a nationwide poll of 1001 voters by Roy Morgan Research. Remarkably, 61 per cent said they thought Australia has a national Bill of Rights, with only 13 per cent indicating no and 26 per cent saying they could not say.

Overall, the proposed citizenship test is unlikely to lead to the hoped for outcomes. I strongly support improving knowledge of our system of government and support for Australian values. However, the focus should be on effective, ongoing education, rather than on just a test. The latter should only follow from the former. Questions need to be asked about whether the money spent on this test could be better used on other types of education and programs that might have a longer term impact. There may well be better ways of producing a more harmonious and cohesive community based upon shared knowledge and values.

Yours sincerely

George Williams