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Submission to: the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee Inquiry into the Australian Citizenship Amendment (Citizenship Testing) Bill 2007

From: the Australian Council of TESOL Associations

The Australian Council of TESOL Association's (ACTA) submission to the inquiry regarding the *Australian Citizenship Amendment Bill 2007* is based on its members' expertise and experience working directly with migrants to Australia, both in teaching the English language, but also more generally in their settlement into the Australian community.

Minister Andrew's speech commending the Bill to the Senate clearly foregrounds a desire to define an Australian identity and a set of values that all Australians can call their own, and the implication is that the introduction of a citizenship test would achieve these aims.

ACTA agrees **English language proficiency** and an **understanding of, and commitment to, how Australian society functions** are the two key factors in ensuring citizens are able to participate as empowered members of the Australian community. However, ACTA questions the capacity of a test to achieve the dual outcomes of both assessing English proficiency and 'citizenship education'. It is certain that a test of 20 multiple choice questions could not measure English language proficiency, and it is also doubtful that a 'basic knowledge of English' would be sufficient to demonstrate meaningful understanding of citizenship concepts. Finally, successful completion of such a test would in no way be any evidence that the candidate actually holds the values the test may allude to.

Citizenship is a concept, and values are abstract, they are not a collection of English language words to be learned by heart and recognised in a series of twenty multiple choice questions. Indeed passing such a test can be achieved by anyone who receives sufficient coaching or with sufficient memory. Factual recall does not provide a measure of 'loyalty to Australia' or those identified common values of 'commitment to the equality of men and women and the spirit of a fair go, of mutual respect and

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compassion for those in need'. Equally, the ability to understand values intrinsic in what it means to be an Australian citizen is not linked to an ability to speak English. And, if these values are to include respect for the dignity of the individual and all races and cultures, then this should be explicitly modelled by our government to those new to our society.

The Minister points to the use of tests in countries such as the UK, Canada and the US as evidence of the need to have one in Australia. These tests require basic recall such as the colours on the flag (US), the names of the aboriginal languages (Canada), or which court uses a jury (UK). We have no evidence that the use of these tests provides these countries with a greater sense of shared identity and values than ours. Indeed, there are quantifiable statistics to suggest that it is just the opposite. Moreover, the Bill's provision for "flexibility to approve more than one test should different arrangements need to be made ...for certain prospective citizens," serves to exacerbate our concern. Traditionally, leeway has been granted to those possessing qualities deemed desirable by the government of the day. What guarantee is there that these prospective citizens are more worthy than others with a 'lower' profile or qualification?

Quite apart from the concern about a test's ability to either assess or instil abstract notions such as values and citizenship, is the fact that the proposed test also purports to test English language proficiency. The integrity of a multiple choice test in ascertaining literacy is, at best, questionable. The measurement of English language proficiency requires a test that does so in a valid and reliable way. There are many such tests, some of which are already available to international students in Australia eg. the IELTS and Cambridge ESOL exams. Enormous amounts of research go into making these valid measures of English language proficiency. They are necessarily long and complicated exams because of the complexity of what it is they are assessing. It is our conviction that the proposed citizenship test is in no way a meaningful or valid test of language proficiency and should not claim to be one.

ACTA is particularly concerned that refugee and humanitarian migrants are the groups most likely to be negatively affected by an English language citizenship test. The Bill suggests that many settlers will be waiting the four years before applying for Citizenship, thereby implying that they will have achieved both English language proficiency and citizenship knowledge to complete the test. However, for many of our refugee and humanitarian entrants that is still not long enough for them to

reach English language proficiency levels that would allow them to reach the standards set by the proposed test. Most refugees and humanitarian entrants have special needs. Many of them have little or no education. Many suffer from the after effects of trauma and poor living conditions. Consequently, even with high levels of motivation and access to high quality teaching, they are likely to take much longer to reach whatever standards are set, than educated migrants. Yet, these migrants are well able to appreciate the advantages of living in a society with the kinds of freedoms which are fundamental to Australia. Indeed, throughout her history, Australia has reaped great benefits from such migrants. With a need and a strong desire to feel secure, the opportunity to become Australian citizens as early as possible is very important to them. Delaying it for whatever reason would unnecessarily prolong their feelings of insecurity and alienation and this perceived rejection may reduce their desire to contribute to their new society. A feeling of belonging and acceptance is key to a cohesive, united and loyal society, and tests that by their very nature are exclusionary are not the way to a united society.

Citizenship and values do not need to be presented in English to be understood. They are much better understood via the language that the migrant is most competent in. It is far better that these concepts are thoroughly explored as early in the migration process as possible rather than waiting until the learners have the English language proficiency to engage with them. This may assist in reducing cultural misunderstandings that can so often lead to disharmony in a society. Resources could be spent training respected community members to achieve this aim in the migrant's own language. This would facilitate a meeting of ways and engender trust rather than leaving new arrivals to fend for themselves until they are linguistically able to learn aspects of culture in a foreign language. On this point ACTA wishes to express concern over specific provisions within the Bill, specifically the ambiguity created in Sections 23A, paragraphs 1 and 6 ("any other matter") and amendments to subsection 21 (paragraph 4, 2A) which would leave open the possibility that the citizenship aspect of any test be administered in any language, which may indeed work in favour of the candidate if the language was their mother tongue, but does not preclude the use of a language in which the applicant has no knowledge at all.

In conclusion, ACTA does not believe that the proposed test can reliably measure both English language proficiency and citizenship knowledge. Testing isn't teaching and some things can't be tested.

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We are opposed to endorsing a test that relies upon learning set responses to predictable questions in order to get a piece of paper. We harbour grave concerns that current English language programmes may have to abandon good language teaching practice to simply ‘teach to the test.’

We believe values are something you live and are demonstrated by the ways in which you interact with those around you, not by the way you answer a multiple choice test.

All Australians want a cohesive and unified Australia but a test won’t achieve that outcome. We must be very careful to match the means to the end – and not pursue a citizenship test simply because others do, or because it may placate the media.

Resources earmarked for test development and administration would be better spent on

- funding extended English language programmes which will give prospective citizens full entry to all that Australia has to offer,
- supporting communities in sharing citizenship values, rights and responsibilities with migrants as early in the migration process as possible, including the development of mother tongue resources

We believe that in doing so, the Government would be truly demonstrating commitment to “uniting all Australians while respecting their diversity.”

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On behalf of all members of the Australian Council of TESOL Associations

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