



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office



Australian Catholic
Migrant &
Refugee Office

10 July 2007

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

We would like to note that in this submission we are reiterating the key points made in ACMRO's response to the discussion paper on Australian Citizenship: *Australian Citizenship: Much more than just a ceremony*.

Introduction of a formal citizenship test

ACMRO share the view that knowledge of Australia and English language skills are immensely helpful and important to the migrant as well as to the community as a whole and that, while values and principles should be discussed and promoted, they should not be used for formal tests.

English Language

While ACMRO acknowledges that knowing the language of the majority of the population is a basic need of the individual, we also suggest that the English language, though extraordinary helpful, is not absolutely essential for the commitment that citizenship involves. We believe that proficiency in English should not be a prerequisite of being an Australian citizen. Of the 6 million migrants who arrived in Australia since 1945, not all of had the opportunity to learn English but many of them have since proven themselves to be wonderful and socially productive Australian citizens.

We are very concerned many entrants under the Humanitarian program would not qualify for citizenship under the new legislation. Given that many humanitarian entrants share a background of limited, if any educational opportunities, and no exposure to English, we know that some of them will never have a full command of the English language, and therefore may not have the ability to complete the test. We believe exemptions for these applicants should be made.

For this group of people, the official hours of English tuition often falls short of what is required to bring them to proficiency and, because of the financial hardship shared by many of them, paying for extra English classes is in many cases simply not an option. Also, the kind of work for which they qualify with low English skills is often casual and low paid, and does not allow them the time nor the finances to enrol in English classes. But this does not make their commitment to Australia any less strong and should not result in Australia seeing their willingness to make Australia their new home any less worthy of our respect and admiration.

Civic Education

While we do not support the introduction of a formal citizenship test, we are open to the introduction of a compulsory citizenship course. This would help migrants to orientate themselves better in Australia. But we believe that a formal citizenship test would be an impossible burden on many migrants (especially on many humanitarian entrants).

The introduction of a citizenship test where minority groups have to prove themselves worthy to be part of the 'Australian family' by means of a formal test could be perceived by many of these groups as discriminatory, and could well act as a major disincentive for potential citizens committing to Australia. The people who would be most disadvantaged would be those who struggle with English and whose cultures are the most different from the Anglo-Celtic tradition.

One could also argue that, if there is a compulsory citizenship test, all Australians should be required to demonstrate their knowledge and appreciation of Australian history, customs and values. We should all, not only new migrants, have a good knowledge and appreciation of our country. There should be better ways to improve the integrity of Australian citizenship, for example civic education that is not just directed to those seeking Citizenship.

We fear that the test would, rather than helping migrants be better citizens, damage the immensely successful tradition Australia has of helping integration of migrants by promoting the high acceptance rate of taking up citizenship.

Yours sincerely,

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Director
Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office