



Premier of Victoria

11 July 2007

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

Thank you for inviting submissions to this inquiry. The Victorian Government submitted its views on the proposed introduction of a formal citizenship test to the Commonwealth Government in October last year, in response to the discussion paper *Australian Citizenship: Much More Than A Ceremony*. I attach that earlier submission for your information and consideration.

The Victorian Government's position on the proposed amendments to the *Australian Citizenship Act 2007* in the Australian Citizenship Amendment (Citizenship Testing) Bill 2007 ("the Bill") is as follows:

- Victoria does not support the introduction of a citizenship test as it risks alienating new arrivals and would create unwarranted difficulties for a range of vulnerable migrant groups, such as refugees and humanitarian entrants.
- Australia is well recognised as a highly harmonious and safe multicultural nation. This is underpinned by a successful history of migration. Migrants – including those with limited English skills – have historically and consistently demonstrated their commitment to Australia by the valuable contribution they have made here.
- Victoria is one of Australia's most culturally diverse states with Victorians coming from more than 230 countries and following more than 110 faiths. One in four Victorians were born overseas. Yet, as expressed to the Commonwealth Government in our submission last year, there has been no strong community feedback in Victoria indicating the need for a formal citizenship test, or for amendments to citizenship arrangements more broadly.
- No evidence has been provided to clearly demonstrate the need for such a test or to demonstrate how such a test will help migrants integrate and maximise the opportunities available to them.

- The Victorian Government contends that for the majority of migrants, current citizenship arrangements, which ensure a basic level of English comprehension and understanding of the responsibilities and rights of Australian citizenship as well as a person's commitment to Australia, are sufficient.
- The Bill introduces an additional eligibility requirement for applicants: that they have an adequate knowledge of Australia. While all citizens require knowledge and understanding of civic institutions and the skills and willingness to actively participate in society, we see no reason to extend to testing this knowledge.
- It should be recognised that Australian migrants arrive with varying levels of English comprehension and some individuals may need an extensive amount of time and assistance in order to reach a basic level of English comprehension. The introduction of a formal citizenship test to assess English comprehension could potentially prevent some migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds from gaining citizenship for years, if ever.
- The Victorian Government is of the view that the range of exemptions from testing being proposed by Minister Kevin Andrews MP, as outlined in his second reading speech, reinforces the argument for why the testing should not proceed.
- Victoria would support strengthening promotion and education of the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship and learning English within existing arrangements, for example building upon the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and civics education in schools. The budgetary resources allocated for the test could be more effectively utilised to assist migrants to embrace Australia and maximise the opportunities available to them through these existing channels. For example, if the overall Commonwealth funding dedicated for the citizenship test of \$107 million over five years was allocated proportionately on a per capita basis to Victoria (that is approximately 25 per cent), the approximately \$5.4 million per annum could fund up to 330,000 hours of additional English language tuition.
- It is difficult to comment on the content of the test itself, or of the resource book that will prepare applicants for the test, as the test will be approved by a written determination from the Minister and the resource book is currently being drafted. However, information that has been released to the media on the content of the test, and the proposals put forward in the Commonwealth Government's discussion paper last year, indicate that the knowledge requirements for the test will extend beyond acquiring civics knowledge to requiring migrants to learn about "Australian values" and the "Australian culture". Any application of values beyond civics knowledge is likely to be fraught with difficulties. We cannot assume that there is an agreed, homogenous understanding of Australian culture and values.

- There is a risk that the proposed citizenship changes may lead to the perception that Australia does not welcome migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds and who may not be able to settle as quickly. Such negative perceptions may be a factor in dissuading some potential migrants from choosing Australia as their preferred migration destination and decrease our ability to attract skilled migrants.

The Victorian Government welcomes your inquiry into the Bill and the opportunity to present these points, which seek to highlight serious policy and implementation concerns and the substantial risks inherent in the proposal. If this Bill is passed it will allow for the potential exclusion of valuable members of the Australian community from gaining the sense of belonging they deserve. The proposal ultimately risks harming the model multicultural society we have built in Australia.

Yours sincerely

HON STEVE BRACKS MP
Premier and Minister for Multicultural Affairs