



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office



Australian Catholic
Migrant &
Refugee Office

6th June 2008

Australian Citizenship Test Review

Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office

The Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO) would like to thank Senator Chris Evans, Minister of Immigration and Citizenship, conveyed by Mr Richard Woolcott, for the opportunity to provide a response on the Australian Citizenship Test Review dated 9 May 2008.

Humanitarian entrants worse off under the citizenship test

In our previous submission on the discussion paper on the introduction of a citizenship test we wrote that a formal citizenship test would be an impossible burden on many migrants. One group particularly disadvantaged by the test are humanitarian entrants given that the tests are only provided in English while many entrants do not come from English speaking backgrounds.

Our concerns are substantiated by the test result rates recently released by Minister Evans. These show that humanitarian program entrants have considerably lower pass rates than other migrant groups. Only 82 per cent in the humanitarian stream passed the test in the six months leading up to the end of March this year. This compares with a significantly higher pass rate of 99 per cent for skilled migrants and a 91 per cent pass rate for family stream migrants.

Citizenship is a core human right

It is essential that humanitarian entrants, who are not afforded protection by their current nationality, be afforded access to a new nationality. Article 34 of the Refugee Convention states that Australia is required to take steps 'as far as possible, to facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees'.

If the citizenship test unfairly bars the access of many humanitarian entrants to citizenship, which is a core human right under article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Australia could be in breach of its humanitarian obligations.

Fear of deportation

The Minister has also informed us that some refugees are not sitting the test out of fear of being deported if they do not pass the test. This fear is not without basis as freedom from deportation is an important benefit of citizenship. The Minister has broad discretion under s 501 of the Migration Act 1958 (Cth) to remove non-citizens from Australia by cancelling their visa on 'character grounds'. We saw the previous government use this power on many occasions to deport Australian permanent residents who had lived in Australia for the majority of their lives, some from infancy, and who often had so little affinity with the country to which they were deported that they could not even speak the language.



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ACMRO believes that if Australia really is the home of the ‘fair go’, then we do not need this discriminatory test that runs the risk of making outsiders of people that should be insiders. ACMRO also questions the value of adding an additional burden on people who deserve a new start and new hope rather than prolonged uncertainty over the fear of being stateless.

Test could increase social disharmony and divisiveness

We are concerned that the citizenship test damages the immensely successful tradition Australia has of helping integration of migrants by promoting the high acceptance rate of taking up citizenship. We have learnt that many refugees and migrants see the test as an attempt to "keep out" unworthy applicants, rather than to educate migrants around citizenship issues.

Rather than advancing social cohesion, which was the stated aim of introducing the citizenship test, the effect will be increased social disharmony and divisiveness and further marginalizing and alienation between migrants and the broader Australian community.

Test an objective assessment?

Many people feel the Government is imposing its own idea of what it means to be Australian by making people sit the test, rather than embracing the cultural diversity that immigration brings. Other people question how it is possible to test prospective citizens on Australian values, when there are so many different opinions about what it means to be an Australian.

Equality of men and women is one of the common values that we have been told every newcomer ought to know about Australia. Interestingly enough, a core criticism against the test has been that the very nature of Australian history, on which the test is based, is in fact very gendered and masculine. Conservative values take precedence and there is a heavy focus on war. For most parts it is about mateship, soldiers and explorers, with only a few references made to women and their place in Australian history.

The effectiveness of the test

ACMRO does not share the belief that a commitment to Australia is something that can be achieved by the study and completion of a formal citizenship test. Commitment to a country and its many values runs much deeper than the ability to perform well under test conditions. A sense of belonging to a country is developed over time, through positive interaction within the community and employment.

The tremendous cost of implementing the test would have been far better spent on programs and services that really help new arrivals settle, i.e. on English classes, community orientation, and courses to assist people participate in opportunities for employment.



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A test will never show that a prospective citizen has taken Australian values into their life. At best it can merely measure that they have learnt **one** set of required responses. An alternative approach would be to make greater efforts to impart an appreciation and knowledge of the English language and Australian values from the beginning of the migration process.

Introducing a formal course - a more constructive approach

ACMRO is open to the prospect of the introduction of a formal course, but without a confronting and possibly alienating test at the end. Taking part in a course, which could be compulsory for applicants for citizenship, would be a far more constructive way of ensuring that people have adequate English and knowledge of Australia to participate fully in Australian society.

We suggest the introduction of a course similar to the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) course: **Let's participate: A course in Australian Citizenship.** AMEP has, since its inception in 1951, provided not only English language classes but has also offered newcomers introductory programs informing them about Australian society and culture and the rights and responsibilities of Australian citizenship. In order to be truly effective such a course would also need to be flexible and offer appropriate services to accommodate for the various needs of participants.

Launch an education campaign on human rights and responsibilities

ACMRO would also like to see, as part of the same process, an education program for the broader Australian society about human rights and responsibilities. Such a program should aim at changing community attitude, combat prejudice and discrimination against all Australians. A broad educational framework for all Australians has a better prospect of advancing the aim of improving opportunities for new Australians to gain meaningful employment. It will also achieve the overall aim of promoting mutual respect between diverse cultures; whilst at the same time acknowledging the enormous contribution that migrants and refugees make to Australia.

ACMRO urges the Government to:

- 1. Abolish the Citizenship test**
- 2. Continue to educate people about their rights and responsibilities as Australians.**

Again, many thanks

Sincerely

Rev Monsignor John Murphy (Director)