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In responding to the discussion paper on Australian Citizenship: *Australian Citizenship: Much more than just a ceremony*, the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (ACMRO) appreciates the desire to make citizenship as meaningful as possible. However, we offer the following observations/concerns.

Our submission has focused on Question 1, although in doing so we believe that we have, to some extent, addressed questions 2,3, and 4.

Should Australia introduce a formal citizenship test?

Various issues will be discussed and explored in our submission in relation to the reasons for introducing a formal citizenship test. In the later part of the submission reflections will be given on possible implications and outcomes for Australia.

We 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.

The discussion paper lacks a robust analysis

Our main concern with the discussion paper is that there is no clear formulation of a problem that would justify significant change. No evidence is given to support the need for change nor to suggest that cohesion and integration are not happening at present. Neither is there any evidence on how the new measures would resolve a problem that has not been demonstrated. There seems to be a presumption in the paper that there is a problem with the current process of granting citizenship and yet no references to studies or papers are given supporting this thesis.

While a clear rationale for introducing a new regime for testing prospective citizens has not been spelled out in the discussion paper itself, much has been said in the media about the imperative for introducing new measures to ensure social cohesion and integration. However, the absence of clear argument supporting the need for the proposed changes is present here as well and can be seen for example when the proposed citizenship test is called "...a genuine attempt to find even better ways of integrating because we have got some serious problems.", (ABC News Online, 28 April 2006, *Citizenship under consideration*), but these serious problems are not named.

There also appears to be a contradiction in the public rationale provided, on the one hand denying that Muslims are a special target, while at the same time saying that *the use of English will particularly help deal with issues within the Muslim community and promote a moderate version of Islam in Australia and help with the fight against global terrorism*" (*ibid*).

Sudden policy shift

In recent weeks we have been told that we need to make significant policy changes to address weaknesses in our citizenship laws. This is an interesting proposition, considering that up to very recently this nation's fifty year history of Australian Citizenship has been referred to and accepted by most parties in the community as a major success story. It was not long ago that the Government made a major evaluation of the citizenship law and policy. In the Report *Australian Citizenship...A Common bond 2001*, (a response to the Report of the Australian Citizenship Council) the following can be read:



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“The Government agrees with the council's view that, overall, the law and the policy relating to Australian citizenship are working well and that, over its fifty years of existence, the legal status of Australian Citizenship has been a major success story in providing a new legal status for those in Australia at the time of its introduction and having welcomed over three million newcomers into the Australian community as fully participating members. “

“The Government also agrees that the overall inclusive and non-discriminatory approach to Australian Citizenship, of welcoming, without undue barriers, migrants and humanitarian entrants who come to Australia as part of the planned migration and humanitarian program, should continue as the basis for future Australian Citizenship policy and law. Accordingly, the Government agrees that the basic criteria for the grant of Australian Citizenship should neither be made harder nor easier.

What are the aims of the proposal?

The lack of any analysis of the assumption that something is “seriously wrong” with the current system, together with the inconsistency in the reasons given for moving towards a stricter citizenship regime, poses important and pressing questions about the intentions of the proposal. It has been suggested that the proposals are aimed at giving comfort to Australians who feel their sense of identity is being threatened. If this is the case, it would be very helpful if evidence of the nature and extent of the threat could be provided

Are the proposals designed merely to make Australians feel better about themselves? If so, we risk the creation and encouragement of divisive assumptions that migrants do not wish to integrate and that they do not want to learn English. Such assumptions together with inconsistent messages and allusions about the link to Muslims and terrorism are not only very unhelpful for the community, but can also prove to be directly harmful for the ongoing peaceful coexistence of various cultures and ethnicities living together in this wonderful country.

Language barriers not perceived as major hurdle by migrants

It's interesting to note that the Government's concern for migrants with limited English and their assumed squandered opportunities does not seem to resonate among the migrants themselves. In a report prepared for DIMIA, 2002; *The Settlement Experience of New Migrants a comparison of wave One and LSIA 1 and SSIA 2* (a study of the experiences of two migrant cohorts interviewed 6, 12 and 24 months after arrival) language barriers, employment and access to services and facilities, were not high on the list of major dislikes about Australia as expressed by the respondents.

It is also our experience that migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds take the learning of English very seriously and make active efforts to improve their English. Learning another language is a challenging and time-consuming experience but over the period of time these migrants improve their English language skills and feel proud of their competitive English.

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. The new proposals would have prevented the acquisition of Citizenship by many who have since proven themselves to be wonderful and socially productive Australian citizens.



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The introduction of a two-tiered system

The process of redefining what it means to be a good Australian citizen and turning proficiency in English language into an intrinsic and compulsory prerequisite for its acquisition, risks the introduction of a new two-tiered system. The new system would draw boundaries between “us” and “them”, treating people who do not speak fluent English as less worthy of being citizens.

Any assumed link between a good citizen and proficiency in English has to be treated with caution. There must be a concern that strict English requirements for the granting of Citizenship will favour those from similar backgrounds to Australia while discouraging people from other parts of the world. Yet experience shows that the ability to speak English fluently is not automatically translated into a desire to become an Australian citizen. In the report prepared for DIMA 2002, *The settlement Experience of New Migrants* (mentioned above), it was found that the best English speakers are the ones least likely to take out citizenship (people from Britain, the USA and New Zealand).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) further dismantles any such assumed relationship between language, culture and citizenship in their brief discussion on the history of, and likelihood, of people to take up citizenship. ABS shows that to have a background which is culturally and politically similar to Australia does not lead to an increase in the take up of citizenship.

In contrast, the report on the settlement experience of new migrants, found that entrants under the Humanitarian scheme were the most likely to take out citizenship. The report states that:

“Humanitarian migrants clearly come with many disadvantages. They have relatively low levels of education, and English language proficiency and quite high levels of psychological distress. “Despite the outward signs of hardship, they are overwhelmingly happy to be in Australia, and are the most likely to take out Australian citizenship”.

We are very concerned many entrants under the Humanitarian program would not qualify for citizenship under the new proposal. 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.

For this group of people, the official 510 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.

Skilled workers may go elsewhere

Then there is the potential economic impact of a new regime of citizenship screening. The sensitivity of pursuing stricter citizenship requirements at a time when Australia is competing internationally for skilled workers has to be questioned. Australia, as a country with an ageing and declining population, needs more skilled workers. If Australia sets the requirements for acquiring citizenship at too high a level, many skilled workers may go to countries where they believe they will be more readily accepted.

Some would argue that the new proposals are not an attempt to turn the clock back, but that they are attempting to ensure that cultural diversity does not come at the expense of social and cultural cohesion. However will potential migrants (with, for example, China being Australia’s key source for immigrants in the Asian region) share that view. They may perceive



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Australia, once the home country of the White Australian Policy (which for so long was considered by major political parties as essential for social harmony and cohesion) as entering another period of fear of its ethnic composition and of confusion about its location in the world.

What is the attraction with Australia?

In the report referred to above on the settlement experience of new migrants (*The settlement Experience of New Migrants a comparison of wave One and LSIA 1 and SSIA 2002*) the two groups of migrants are remarkably alike in their motivations for immigrating and also in their stated likes and dislikes about Australia. Overall, the so-called 'push' factors (such as social, political, economic conditions and employment in their former home country) were not given as important reasons for migrating. Only a very small percentage were dissatisfied with life in their home country.

The dominant reasons given for migrating to Australia were 1) attraction with the country's opportunities, natural environment and lifestyle; 2) reunion with family who had already migrated; and 3) marrying an Australian spouse. When asked to nominate the things they disliked about Australia, the dominant response was that they had no dislikes. Only 3 per cent of the migrants mentioned racism and only 3 per cent said that Australians were unfriendly.

Based on the above, it does not seem that employment or economic reasons feature prominently as a reason for migration (at least for those migrants who meet our strict migration requirements). A stricter citizenship regime does not seem to be the recipe to ensure that migrants continue to feel welcome in Australia. No government can legislate for love of the country.

Conclusion

The citizenship ceremony as presently designed is beautiful, simple and correct in regards to the values to which new citizens commit. However, in some places where considerable numbers of people regularly become Australian citizens, there have been examples of very large impersonal ceremonies being held only once or twice a year. To ensure that the ceremony is meaningful for our new citizens, ACMRO suggests that an emphasis be placed on having small numbers of new citizens at each ceremony and that every effort be made to make the ceremony one that befits the importance of the occasion.

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 and elderly people).

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 to be a compulsory citizenship test, all Australians should be required to demonstrate their knowledge and appreciation of Australia history, customs and values. We should all, not only new migrants, have a good knowledge and appreciation of our country.

We fear that the proposed 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.