

**A response to *Australian Citizenship: much more than a ceremony*  
Discussion Paper by the Commonwealth Department of  
Immigration and Multicultural Affairs  
(September 2006)**

**Joint submission to the Commonwealth Department of Immigration  
and Multicultural Affairs**

**Prepared by the  
General Synod Public Affairs Commission  
and  
the Melbourne Diocese Social Responsibilities Committee  
Anglican Church of Australia  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

The following comments refer to the questions outlined on page 14 of the discussion paper, *Australian Citizenship: much more than a ceremony*.

### **1 Should Australia introduce a formal citizenship test?**

The Discussion Paper, *Australian Citizenship: Much more than a Ceremony*, rightly emphasises the importance of citizenship yet the case for the introduction of a formal citizenship test is surprisingly weak. The policy objective for testing is to assist people to fully participate in the Australian community, giving them an incentive to learn English and understand the Australian way of life. Unfortunately, the document offers no evidence to demonstrate the deficiency of participation by migrants under the existing requirements of the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948*. Neither does it offer any means for evaluating and reviewing the delivery of stated policy objectives. It would seem all that the test would measure is a limited range of knowledge about Australian society and its institutions. It remains unsubstantiated how such a test could or would encourage participation in society. If as Andrew Robb, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs says in his Foreword:

“Australia has been hugely successful at integrating millions of people with diverse backgrounds from over 200 countries, because, in the main, we have embraced and drawn from the wealth of that diversity, and we are all the richer for it.”

It suggests that the current approach to citizenship is in fact satisfactory.

The document also makes much of the precedent for testing set by Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and the Netherlands. Although the paper provides much information about testing in these countries, it does not explain why they deemed it necessary to introduce such testing at that point in time. The paper makes no effort to evaluate whether such testing has delivered the policy objectives set by these nations, a significant weakness as testing has been in place in the US since the late 1980s and Canada since 1994.

It would therefore seem to be premature to embark on such a large and expensive change to public policy without any proof that such testing would deliver the desired outcomes.

Furthermore, we are concerned that calls for citizenship-testing may in fact contribute to a sense of alienation by migrants from non-European backgrounds. The current 'clash of civilisations' between Australians of European descent and our citizens from predominantly Muslim nations is one example of such social division. The values we need in good citizens are, in fact, largely universal. Australia's history shows that migrants have integrated well and adopted Australian citizenship in a creative way, without a formal test. The risk of citizenship testing is further division within Australia's communities.

## **2 How important is knowledge of Australia for Australian citizenship?**

Life in Australia is complex and multi-faceted with varying levels of participation. The definition of citizenship presented in the discussion paper is unclear and highly fluid, ranging from participation in education and employment to 'integration', 'fully embracing the Australian way of life' and 'having a voice in the country's future.' The paper is implicitly concerned with matters of national cohesion and assumes that knowledge of Australia will assist with the process of migrant settlement. The problem comes when trying to qualify and then quantify the scope of knowledge necessary for the desirable level of societal participation. What exactly do migrants, or others who come to Australia and make it their home, need to know, and who decides?

Australian society is one that experiences institutional stability and rapid cultural change. Key federal and state institutions (e.g. legal and governance systems) change slowly so that knowledge about them appears more factual and procedural by nature.

Australia's Parliamentary democracy is founded on the Westminster system inherited from the United Kingdom and the values which have underpinned our legal and constitutional arrangements have been driven by Judaeo-Christian traditions. While the years since the Second World War have witnessed a shift in the sociological make-up of the nation, with the arrival of immigrants from many different cultures and with a variety of religious and faith perspectives, the values of tolerance, racial harmony, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and justice have not changed as a result. A case however can be argued that governments have influenced shifts in some Australian attitudes over recent years which have created division in society and contributed to a perceived value shift.

Elements from everyday life change rapidly, particularly the nature and type of business and social services provided by community organisations and government agencies. Knowledge of Australian society tends to be of a more practical nature and learned quickly, through experience or reading something as simple as a travel guide. Australian values sit somewhere in between and, although they change at a moderate pace, and some semblance of a consensus can often be found, diversity inevitably exists between various social groups. Our attitudes to children, the elderly, the unemployed and impoverished, our definition of 'family', social mobility, consumption, and even economic interests like protectionism and globalisation, have all become more diverse over the past two decades. As various groups rightly argue for the merits of their particular ideological position, the question of whose view prevails becomes vitally important.

While it is reasonable to assume that some knowledge of Australia's national institutions and its history is important, what is less clear is the extent to which such knowledge might be nationalistic or federalist in scope, especially given that each State and Territory may be seen as a distinctive society. Abstract knowledge about the Australian Constitution might make for a more active and involved citizenry but many Australian-born citizens are unaware or uninterested in such matters. The practical knowledge required for life in a

remote area of the Northern Territory, regional North Queensland, inner city Adelaide or suburban Sydney will vary according to location. Such local knowledge is invaluable, but unlikely to ever feature on a written test.

We would be concerned that the body of Australian knowledge implied by a testing regime is likely to be highly secular, conformist and highly selective by virtue of the tasks required. A worldview that denies the importance of the spiritual life is just as ideologically-driven as one that recognises it. Anglicans understand the reality that deeply-held values and opinions often collide. What is important is how we choose to live within the inevitable tensions resulting from our diversity – this is something that cannot be measured or inculcated by a test. To believe that is to mistake knowledge for commitment, assent for true belief. Australians will respond to these tensions differently and we need space to do so without an anxious government presenting the misleading view that a written test will somehow magically resolve the many issues within the complex realities of Australia's cultural diversity and our globalised context.

### **3 What level of English is required to participate as an Australian citizen?**

Australians will vary markedly in their assessment of this question. Personal experience as visitors and residents of non-English speaking countries highlights the value of knowing the local language but also the opportunities that exist to manage without language proficiency. A person's capacity to identify and utilise the opportunities that exist in a society often reflects their individual level of language acquisition. We should be mindful that many Australian-born people who are living on the margins of our society have low levels of literacy and numeracy and lack the supportive migrant communities that assist many new arrivals to this country.

We would consider that any language requirement be supported by an adequate system that provides easy and affordable access to language acquisition. The danger in linking acquisition to testing is that the system may only aspire to fulfil specified minimum testing requirements at the expense of higher levels of English-language proficiency.

English language and literacy skills ought to be encouraged by all Australian governments. A more positive step would see an increase in funding for an Australia-wide English-as-a-second-language (ESL) program that is accessible and relevant to all migrants and citizens.

### **4 How important is a demonstrated commitment to Australia's way of life and values for prospective Australian citizens ?**

There is an ideological inconsistency within the current proposals for a citizenship testing regime. People who are born in Australia are, by definition, Australian citizens. These citizens, along with people who have been granted citizenship as children, were never required to formally demonstrate their compatibility with 'Australian values'. The making of an 'Australian Citizenship Pledge' was not necessary.

Having noted this, the Anglican Church is very supportive of any discussion about our way of life and values by the Australian community. At the same time, it is conscious that although the government of the day will seek to facilitate this discussion it nevertheless has its own agenda to advance. The discussion paper gives little acknowledgment of the fact that the Australian 'way of life' and values within our communities are much broader than the matter of citizenship. The document correctly presents citizenship in terms of access to Federal Government services and employment (within its own ranks), but confuses the issue when linking it concepts such as 'values' and 'way of life'. We would be reluctant to see any government specify the terms of citizenship beyond this narrow concept simply because their constituency and interests are narrow and unrepresentative of the actual community whom they 'claim' to represent.

The Anglican Church supports the values advocated through the Department of Education, Science and Training's Values Education Study, Good Practice for Schools program.<sup>1</sup> However, we are inclined to see their list as indicative rather than prescriptive, particularly as traditional Christian values such as mercy and justice towards the undeserving are not fully recognized. In fact, Christians teach that behaviour (way of life) and values are always to be reformed under the influence of the Holy Spirit, guided by the Word of God in Scripture. Therefore, Australia's way of life and values are never sacrosanct but always under scrutiny, and even critique, from a Christian point of view.

We strongly oppose any use of these broad yet poorly-defined terms in order to marginalise minorities within Australian society as though they are somehow 'unAustralian' when their participation is seen to be lacking, according to another group. It takes time for migrants to adopt the Australian way of life and values. By doing so, these new Australians modify and influence our way of life and values in countless important yet often subtle ways, in a process measured more by generations than by governments. Government attempts at 'social engineering' have rarely been helpful in this context. In fact, its efforts are counterproductive, as governments impose the way of life and values of one dominant group on others, (as was abundantly demonstrated by the experiences of the 'stolen generation', for example).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Andrew Robb's Foreword contains a presumptuous comment: "Australia has successfully combined people into one family with one overriding culture, based on a set of common values." It is not clear that such a single culture has been successfully generated; many cultural, ethnic and religious groups in Australia would disagree. It is also unclear that Australians share common values—our variety of ways of life, moral choices, uses of money, approaches to education, attitudes to children and attitudes to the elderly would suggest otherwise.

Nor is it clear that such a single culture is a desirable goal for a nation; attempts to create such cultures have often lead to deprivation of individual liberties and punitive approaches to ways of life diverging from the declared norms. It is hoped that none of this language in the citizenship paper or test itself would contribute to such outcomes.

The current citizenship pledge seems to be sufficient. It commits a citizen to acknowledging the rule of law (which Christians are commanded to do where it is not in conflict with the teachings of Jesus Christ). It expresses what Christians would call 'neighbourly love', in its expression of allegiance to the Australian people, and respect for their rights and liberties. The pledge already runs the risk of overstepping what a Christian can commit to in asking for loyalty to 'Australia'—this could be construed as a form of idolatry, where some idea or entity is set up in 'competition' with God for one's loyalty. However, it is taken that the loyalty is to the good of the nation, not to the nation above all else, and with this commitment a Christian has no argument.

16 November 2006

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<sup>1</sup> The values identified by the program consist of: care and compassion; doing your best; fair go; freedom; honesty and trustworthiness; integrity; respect; responsibility; and understanding, tolerance and inclusion.  
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*Citizenship Submission 2006*