



7 June 2017

Strengthening the test for Australian Citizenship  
Department of Immigration and Border Protection  
PO Box 25  
Belconnen ACT 2616

Sent via email: [citizenship.submissions@border.gov.au](mailto:citizenship.submissions@border.gov.au)

### **Submission on the proposed changes to the test for Australian citizenship**

The Australian Human Rights Commission ('the Commission') makes this submission to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection in response to the call for submissions in the *Strengthening the test for Australian Citizenship* discussion paper (April 2017).

This submission will primarily respond to three of the themes raised in the discussion paper: Australian Values, Integration and English Language Testing.

#### *Background*

Citizenship tests can help ensure that prospective citizens of a country possess an adequate knowledge of the history, institutions and values of the country they have chosen to join. They may also test prospective citizens for having some proficiency in the national language.

Citizenship tests also help to set the tone for membership in a society. The content of the Australian citizenship test may signal to the Australian community about what governments believe it means to be 'Australian'.

The practice of administering a test as part of the citizenship process is well established and used in many OECD countries. It is, when properly conceived and administered, uncontroversial. Australia's citizenship regime should be supported by a citizenship test that is regarded as fair and just by citizens and would-be citizens alike.

#### *Australian Values*

The Australian Government has proposed to amend the Australian Values Statement and the Pledge of Commitment by including a reference to the requirement of allegiance to Australia and requiring all applicants for citizenship to take steps to integrate into, and contribute to, Australian society.

The Commission has stated in previous submissions to the Department that the current Pledge of Commitment contains an appropriate statement of the rights and responsibilities of Australian Citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

The rights and responsibilities of citizenship are defined by Australia's liberal democratic tradition and values – its parliamentary democracy, its rule of law, its respect for rights and freedoms. Citizenship is not defined by ancestry, ethnicity, race or lifestyle. Becoming an Australian citizen leaves room for a citizen to express their cultural heritage and identity, so long as they uphold their civic responsibilities.

### *Integration*

The Commission welcomes the Government's interest in strengthening citizenship and promoting a more cohesive society. Australia's multicultural society is only successful because immigrants and their descendants, over time, become full members of Australian society.

The path of integration can traverse more than one generation. This reality should inform the design of any citizenship test. It would be misplaced to measure integration only by the contribution that immigrants currently make to Australian society, without recognising the future contributions they and their children will make.

Moreover, the task of civic integration is not confined to aspiring citizens. There is considerable scope for improving the civic literacy of Australian-born citizens. Research surveys indicate there is a poor average level of knowledge that citizens have about the operation of the political system.<sup>2</sup> It would be anomalous to hold naturalised citizens to a standard that is significantly more stringent than the standard expected of natural born Australian citizens (who are not tested on their civic knowledge or participation in society).

### *English Language Testing*

Under the current citizenship regime, aspiring citizens are required to possess a level of 'basic' English to meet the requirements for citizenship. The new proposal is for aspiring citizens to be required to achieve a minimum level of English competency equivalent to an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Band 6.

This proposed change would involve a significant increase on the current standard. For example, undergraduate academic admission to many Australian universities requires minimum overall band scores of between 5.5 and 6.5. Many Australia-born citizens would not possess a written or spoken command of English equivalent to this standard.

The impact of this change would likely be considerable. One recent analysis of immigrants in the Adult Migrant English Program indicates that anywhere between

---

<sup>1</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission Submission to *Australian Citizenship – your right, your responsibility* discussion paper, 30 June 2015.

<sup>2</sup> The Australian Election Study began testing political knowledge in 1996, and up to this decade found that a majority of respondents could only accurately answer one out of six 'true or false' questions relating to Australia's political system and political history. See Ian McAllister, *The Australian Voter*, (UNSW Press, 1st ed, 2011), 68.

30,000 and 40,000 new migrants each year are highly unlikely to meet the proposed English proficiency level for Australian citizenship in their first decade of settlement.<sup>3</sup> Those on humanitarian visas may be disproportionately affected.

Such a scenario represents a concerning prospect. There could potentially be a danger that such a cohort of immigrants could find it difficult to become Australian citizens within a reasonable time.

Rather than introducing a higher English language requirement as a prerequisite for citizenship, the Government could consider strengthening English language support for migrants and humanitarian entrants to assist them in attaining English proficiency.

### *Recommendations*

The Commission makes the following recommendations.

**Recommendation 1:** The Commission recommends no change to the Pledge of Commitment and the Australian Values Statement.

**Recommendation 2:** The Commission recommends that the citizenship test limit its assessment of values and integration to prospective citizens' knowledge of the rights and responsibilities of liberal democratic citizenship. The Commission recommends that the citizenship test continue to assess prospective citizens' knowledge of Australian history and of Australian government and law.

**Recommendation 3:** The Commission recommends that English language support for migrants and humanitarian entrants be strengthened.

**Recommendation 4:** The Commission recommends against the adoption of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Band 6 standard. The Commission recommends retaining the current level of English competency that is tested when applicants sit the citizenship test.

Yours sincerely



Dr Tim Soutphommasane  
**Race Discrimination Commissioner**

T +61 2 9284 9835  
F +61 2 9284 9794  
E [tim.soutphommasane@humanrights.gov.au](mailto:tim.soutphommasane@humanrights.gov.au)

---

<sup>3</sup> Henry Sherrell, "A new class of migrants: the never-to-be-citizens", Inside Story, 27 April 2017: <http://insidestory.org.au/a-new-class-of-migrants-the-never-to-be-citizens>