



Uniting Church in Australia

Submission to the Citizenship Test Review Committee **CITIZENSHIP TEST REVIEW**

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This submission was prepared on behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia by
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INTRODUCTION

The Uniting Church in Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the operation of the Australian Citizenship Test.

The Uniting Church is a multicultural Church, welcoming people from all cultural backgrounds and maintaining a vibrant multicultural life that is reflected in our structures, priorities and teachings. In 1985 the Fourth National Assembly of the Uniting Church adopted a statement on multiculturalism, stating

‘The Uniting church seeks to be open to changes that the Holy Spirit will bring to the church because of the creative contributions of people of different racial and cultural groups to its life.’

Worship within the Uniting Church is celebrated in a variety of settings and languages, in culturally appropriate ways. Congregations are often organised around cultural familiarity, ethnicity or language in order to make services suitable and accessible. The role of first-generation migrants in the Uniting Church is considerable, and many have found that contribution to the Uniting Church community is not precluded by varied ability to speak English or the length of residence in Australia. Migrant-ethnic communities and individuals greatly enrich our corporate life.

In July 2002, the Uniting Church released its Policy Paper on Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Humanitarian Entrants, which outlines key principles that we believe should underpin Australia's policies, legislation, and practices. These principles reflect the Church's belief in the inherent dignity of all people and our commitment to work for justice. While the issues associated with citizenship relate to a broader constituent body of migrants than refugees and humanitarian entrants, our work with asylum seekers and other migrants has given us a first-hand experience of some of the issues facing immigrants to Australia with non-English-speaking backgrounds and variant cultural needs.

Part of the witness of the Uniting Church in Australia is to challenge the structures that create and perpetuate inhospitality, injustice and division across society. The Uniting Church advocates for a just response to the needs of all people - citizens, visa holders and asylum seekers, and the international community - that recognises Australia's responsibilities as a wealthy global citizen, upholds the human rights and safety of all people, is culturally sensitive, and is based on just and humane treatment, including non-discriminatory, accountable and transparent processes. In particular, we call for a focus on inclusiveness in Australia's policy approach to those who seek to become part of the Australian community. Citizenship and the citizenship commitment should not be used as an exclusionary device.

In this spirit, the Uniting Church offers these comments to the Citizenship Test Review Committee.

In March 2008, the Uniting Church National Assembly adopted a position to oppose the continued use of the Citizenship Test. The Uniting Church's opposition to the test is based on the following grounds:

1. The test inevitably fails to comprehend the nature of citizenship, which is misrepresented by the test. The test fails to acknowledge the primary role of community in Australian democracy.
2. The attempt to embody so-called 'Australian values' in a citizenship test implies a slanted and unnuanced history of Australia told from a point of view approved by the government of the day. The appeal to folk legend and the prominence of sporting heroes in understanding the nature of Australian society is irrelevant to the actual exercise of citizenship.
3. Regardless of their performance at a 'citizenship test', the presence of people with diverse cultural backgrounds contributes significantly to the enrichment of a multifaceted community. Compliance with a stipulated test tends towards assimilation and works against the enhancement of multiculturalism.
4. The presence of new residents in Australia already requires compliance with the laws of the country, rendering the test redundant.
5. The type of questions asked of prospective citizens tends to trivialise the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship.
6. Aspects of the test are potentially excluding of certain people.

THE NATURE OF CITIZENSHIP

Citizenship inherently implies membership of a community of people with diverse interests and aspirations, but who are united in their resolution to live peaceably together, and in their mutual respect for each other as fellow citizens. We hope for a community where all members are supported and are encouraged to contribute to the building of a better, more vibrant society. These aspirations are only obliquely touched on in some questions of the citizenship test.

There is no reference in the *Becoming an Australian Citizen* document to value for and commitment to community, or the role that a strong and vibrant community has in enhancing life for people in Australia. Good citizenship is encouraged by healthy, democratic communities and is grown in individuals as we learn to live together, participating actively in our society including in its political life.

A TRIVIALISING TEST

Given the above comments about the nature of citizenship, the test as it stands not only fails to comprehend the implications of citizenship, but it also tends to distract from and trivialise the genuine nature of citizenship. On the set of example questions in the official government booklet, *Becoming an Australian Citizen*, only one question would appear to have practical value to new citizens: question 20, relating to the requirement that all citizens over 18 years of age be enrolled on the electoral register.

Question 12 on the example set asks: 'What are the colours on the Australian flag?'

Question 3 asks: 'Who was the first Prime Minister of Australia?' As is often pointed out, very few 'old' Australian citizens are able to answer this question, and its bearing on being an Australian citizen is unclear.

Question 15 asks: 'In what year did the European settlement of Australia start?' Many Indigenous Australians would question the intent of this question.

Question 4 is the notorious Don Bradman question: 'Which one of these Australians is famous for playing cricket?'

- Rod Laver.
- Sir Donald Bradman.
- Sir Hubert Opperman.

Popular as sport is in Australia, there are many Australian citizens who get by without an interest in sport, even cricket.

Question 5 asks: 'What is a Bill?'

Even some undergraduates in political science would have some problems with this one, and again one would have to ask, what is the particular relevance of this question to exercising Australian citizenship.

Question 1 in both the online Practice Test and Test Tutorial asks: 'Which one of these is a responsibility for every Australian citizen?'

- Renounce their citizenship of any other country
- Serve in Australian Diplomatic Missions overseas
- Join with Australians to defend Australia and its way of life, should the need arise

The correct answer is the final option, however it is unclear to us what this statement means. The implication seems to be that, should Australia go to war, all *citizens* are expected to perform some type of *compulsory* military service. The question is, in fact, entirely misplaced in a citizenship test because the responsibility to serve in the Defence Force during a time of war is not a responsibility of citizens but of everyone who has been resident in Australia for over six months (and who is over 18 years of age and younger than 60 years (Section 59). Furthermore, the presence of this question as the first on both the Practice Test and Test Tutorial implies that it is a very important facet of Australian citizenship. We are also concerned that there is no explanation of the exemptions under the *Defence Act 1903* (Section 61a) in *Becoming an Australian Citizen*.

AUSTRALIAN 'VALUES' AND AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

The 'values' listed as important to modern Australia are worthy for any democracy. The use of the Citizenship Test is certainly not the best way, however, to promote these values in the community. It is not clear how the test in any way ensures that values such as 'respect for equal worth, dignity and freedom of the individual', 'freedom of speech', and 'freedom of religion and secular government' for example, are held and respected by new citizens.

The claim to be presenting 'Australian history' in the official textbook, *Becoming an Australian Citizen*, is quite problematical. It is clearly intended to paint a rosy picture of our country, and to avoid any hint of a 'black-armband' view of Australian history. This is not to say that a truly balanced presentation would be possible in any succinct document like this, but that the whole enterprise of encapsulating a nation's history in this way is futile. Even so, the summary account is not without its interest, and contains some useful information. It must also be said that the destruction of Aboriginal society and the persecution of Aboriginal people is frankly acknowledged, although, in this post-Sorry day era, its relatively bland account glosses the full horrors of the process.

Nevertheless, there are clearly misleading implications of the potted history that is presented. The most striking is the White Australia Policy, not mentioned by name until the brief account of its repeal. The previous cursory mention of the exclusion of Asiatic peoples from immigration and the determination of the newly federated Australia to be 'white' seem to be presented merely as preludes to the laudable repeal of the policy in 1973. On constitutional matters, the so-called 'separation of powers' is represented in a misleading and inaccurate way. Immigrants are encouraged to exercise the rights of citizenship as participation in the Australian polity, but the opportunities offered are confined to voting, joining a political party, campaigning for candidates, and possibly standing for election. This is a narrowly slanted version of participatory democracy and a limited characterization of citizenship. There is a partisan bias to the presentation when it is claimed as settled policy that industries be left 'to the discipline of the market'. Throughout there is a somewhat embarrassing emphasis on 'mateship' and Australians being 'mates', as though being Australian required colloquial speech.

MULTICULTURALISM AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO AN ENRICHED COMMUNITY

There are unmistakable undertones of 'assimilation' in the testing procedure. In the government document *History of the Citizenship Test*, it is claimed that 'Becoming a citizen involves a commitment to a shared future in Australian and core values.' However,

'While migrants are not expected to leave their traditions behind, it is expected that they embrace Australian values and integrate into the Australian society. In becoming an Australian citizen, migrants are required to formally pledge their loyalty to Australia and its people.'

This requirement is a not too thinly veiled attack on the idea of multiculturalism which is arguably more enriching of our society than integration.

THE TEST IS REDUNDANT

The test and the citizenship pledge are redundant, since people resident in Australia are already subject to its laws, which they are required to obey whether they pledge themselves to do so or not. Surely it is a sufficient test of 'loyalty' that a person chooses to undertake the rigours of migrating to this country.

From 15 October 2007, applicants for provisional, permanent and temporary visas have been required to sign an 'Australian Values Statement' pledging to obey the laws of Australia. Furthermore, provisional and permanent visa applicants are required to read a *Life in Australia* booklet and pledge a commitment to respect several 'values' of Australian society. A significant amount of material in the *Life in Australia* booklet is quite similar to that in the *Becoming an Australian Citizen* booklet which citizenship applicants are required to read. People applying for Australian citizenship will have already pledged to obey the laws of this country, and many (those holding provisional or permanent visas) will have committed to respecting Australian 'values' after reading material very similar to that in the *Becoming an Australian Citizen* document.

THE TEST IS EXCLUSIONARY

It is emphasised in the official documents that learning English is desirable, with the implication that the main purpose of the test is to assess competence in English. That it is desirable is beyond question, but it is not apparent that immigrants not yet competent in English are undesirable as citizens. Australian history is blessed with many people who, with little or no English, have made exceptional contributions to Australian society as citizens. It is important, in this light, to examine whether the English language component of the test is proving to be a strong deterrent for prospective citizenship applicants.

Case Study

A staff member of a Uniting Church agency in Victoria is married to a person whose first language is Arabic. This man's English language skills are certainly of a 'basic' standard. On sitting the Citizenship Test, however, he could not identify 'Advance Australia Fair' as Australia's 'National Anthem'. Whilst he certainly knew 'Advance Australia Fair', he did not understand that this was referred to in English as Australia's 'National Anthem'.

The Refugee Council of Australia has noted that refugees and humanitarian entrants, the vast majority who are from non-English speaking backgrounds, are presently the category of migrants who are more likely to seek Australian citizenship. Figures from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship show that test applicants from the Humanitarian Stream have a lower pass rate on their first or subsequent attempts compared with Skilled Stream and Family Stream applicants (82 percent in the period 1 October 2007 to 31 March 2008, compared with 99 percent in the Skilled Stream and 91 percent in the Family Stream).¹

¹ Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2008), *Australian Citizenship Test: Snapshot Report April 2008*, available: http://www.citizenship.gov.au/_pdf/citztest-snapshot-report-2008-april.pdf, accessed: 15 May 2008

English language assistance is available to test applicants. However, as the Citizenship Test website states:

'To be eligible for this assistance, you will need to have completed at least 400 hours of English language tuition under the Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP), and be assessed by the AMEP provider as not having the English language reading skills necessary to complete the test unassisted.'²

For many prospective citizenship applicants, completing the 400 hours of AMEP classes in order to obtain language assistance on the test is not a practical or achievable requirement.

This group includes

- migrants from cultural backgrounds and circumstances where formal learning has never been undertaken or where formal examinations, reading and writing are either not encouraged for certain groups; or have been rendered non-existent by instability in the person's country of origin. This group of people might especially be persons from lower socio-economic backgrounds or, more prevalently, women who access to formal education have been limited by gendered cultural attitudes; and humanitarian entrants whose home nation has been devastated by violence.
- female migrants, who are caring for children and other family members in the home and cannot attend AMEP classes regularly.
- migrants living in areas that lack reliable public transport to and from AMEP class locations.

Case Study³

He has sat for, and failed the Citizenship Test four times. He selects his multiple choice answers randomly, in the hope that he will eventually answer 12 out of the 20 questions correctly, enough for him to pass the test, and get his Australian citizenship. If his family is like many of those who have fled from Iraq, they are probably spread around the world. He cannot use his Iraqi passport, assuming he has one, instead having to rely on 'travel documents', which are not accepted in the European Union or the United States. For him, Australian Citizenship will not only bring a passport that will allow him to connect with his family overseas. It will provide a sense of security, belonging and protection not afforded to him in Iraq.

So why doesn't he just learn English if citizenship is so important to him?

He is over 40 and is finding it hard to learn a new language. He has a number of medical problems, but physical and psychological, as a result of his life living under Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Initially only granted temporary protection, this status barred him from accessing many services available to refugees, the opportunity to go to English classes among them. His application for permanent residence was delayed in the hope that the war in Iraq would quieten down enough to send him home. This meant that he was not granted his permanent visa until late in 2005, and it was only then, despite living in the community since 2001, that he could start the two year residency requirement.

² Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 'Do I need to sit the citizenship test', available: <http://www.citizenship.gov.au/test/eligibility/index.htm>, accessed: 20 May 2008

³ Hoffman, S. (2008), 'Testing years for a scattered, scared people', *The Age*, Thursday 10 January, p.11

Citizenship application numbers have decreased substantially since the introduction of the test. Applications fell from more than 21,000 in September 2007 to 2170 in October 2007, the month the test was introduced.⁴ Although it may be reasonable to suggest that applications would increase prior to the introduction of the test due to the additional requirements of the new system, applications in the months since have not increase dramatically, and remain far below the average level in the years prior to the introduction of the test.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Uniting Church strongly recommends that the Australian Government cease using the Citizenship Test. The use of the Test trivialises the idea of citizenship and works against the establishment of a rich, multicultural society. The test acts as a deterrent to and is exclusionary towards the most enthusiastic potential citizenship applicants and is fundamentally incompatible with the exercise of citizenship throughout the community.

⁴ Figures obtained from the office of Mr Petro Georgiou MP