



The Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory

Submission for the Inquiry into Australian Citizenship Amendment (Citizenship Testing) Bill 2007

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs
Department of the Senate
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Introduction – What is the MCNT?

First established in 1977, the Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory (MCNT) is a community-based non-profit organisation managed by a board of dedicated volunteers. The MCNT receives operational funding from the Northern Territory Government's Office of Multicultural Affairs and project funding from various Commonwealth Government agencies.

As the peak multicultural community organisation in the Top End, the MCNT is dedicated to representing and advocating the interests, concerns and aspirations of migrants and refugees – many from non-English speaking backgrounds. It is the aim of service providers such as the MCNT to identify and address barriers to social and economic participation. The MCNT supports cultural diversity and promotes social cohesion.

The staff and project officers and board members at the MCNT interact daily with our clients and stakeholders through a range of projects and programs that facilitate capacity building and mutual respect and lead to a broader understanding and acceptance of the wealth of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity in our community.

The MCNT and Expressed Concerns about a Citizenship Test

The MCNT welcomes this opportunity to provide this submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs. The view of the MCNT is that a formal citizenship test should not be introduced and that the current arrangements should be maintained.

The MCNT previously provided a response in November 2006 to the Citizenship Discussion Paper "*Australian Citizenship: Much More than a Ceremony*" distributed to stakeholders by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). The MCNT facilitated a community consultative meeting to discuss the proposed changes canvassed in this discussion paper on Wednesday evening 27th September 2006.

This community consultative meeting at MCNT was well attended, with representatives from a number of community organisations and ethnic groups including the Filipino-Australia Association of the NT, the Papua New Guinea - Australia Social and Cultural Group Inc, the Sudanese Australian Association of the NT, the Islamic Society of the NT, the African Community Council of the NT, the Cambodian-Australian Community Association of the NT, the United Nations Association of Australia - NT Division, Melaleuca Refugee Centre, the Liberian community, the Somali community, as well as a representative from the NT Office of Multicultural Affairs and Senator Trish Crossin.

It was the unanimous decision of the attendees at this community consultative meeting to oppose the proposal for a formal citizenship test. From the meeting's representatives a 11 member working committee was formed with the brief to draft a petition and to prepare MCNT's formal response to DIAC's Citizenship Discussion Paper in November 2006.

The Proposed Citizenship Test – A Recipe for Alienation

Central to this proposed legislation is the requirement for a formal citizenship test. The MCNT supports the requirement for non-English speaking background migrants to learn the English language, to know more of its history and to commit to a minimum set of universal values such as the respect for the law, democracy and equality.

The MCNT believes the current citizenship model is effective and seriously questions the link between passing a test and being thought of and feeling 'Australian' in our society. The MCNT believes that a citizenship test will be a step backwards; it will be a divisive strategy with the potential to create a tiered society; it will effectively disenfranchise many new settlers and effectively reduce the number of people taking up citizenship; it will reflect adversely on the existing citizens of Australia.

The MCNT views our cultural, linguistic and religious diversity as a primary asset, a key part of our national identity, and a source of social and economic capital. Over the past 60 years, the Australian nation has welcomed 6 million migrants from more than 200 countries. Almost a quarter of the Australian population was born overseas.

Australia is a land of immigrants. Diversity leads to strength and works for all Australians. The key to securing community harmony and social cohesion is inclusiveness. As a nation, we should aim to empower people of diverse cultural backgrounds to fully participate in all aspects of the Australian society and economy.

The Impact of a Formal Citizenship Test on Refugees

The MCNT is particularly concerned about the local and national impact of the proposed Citizenship Test on refugees. During the past decade there has been a rapid increase in the intake of refugee and humanitarian migrants from the African continent. The African community is one of the youngest and the fastest growing new and emerging culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Australia.

The experience of protracted displacement in insecure, unsafe and unsustainable camps in countries of first asylum and with limited support from the international community has serious social consequences for refugees. These displaced populations most often have more complex resettlement needs for life in Australia than those who have not experienced such prolonged displacement. This has particular impacts on children and young people who often have known no other life or community environment that is not a refugee camp.

Australia has a commendable history and reputation in effectively meeting its international humanitarian obligations in terms of refugee resettlement in terms of the size of its program as well as in quality of many of the resettlement services provided. On a per capita basis, Australia in fact settles more off-shore refugees and spends more on the settlement needs of these refugees than any other country.

An estimated 70% of refugees presently arriving in Australia have experienced some form of torture, including rape and physical assault, or extensive periods of living in fear, and this trauma experience frequently results in significant mental health issues. In the past five years, there has been a substantial increase in the settlement of African humanitarian arrivals, and this has impacted on Government agencies and service providers.

The increased intake of highly traumatised refugees from protracted refugee situations in Africa, has seen many service providers – at least in the short term – not adequately resourced or trained to respond to the increased level of needs from particularly vulnerable groups, particularly women and children.

Many African refugees have spent extended periods in refugee camps often for 10-15 years, without access to adequate food, water or health services and exposure to high levels of violence and trauma. Many young people have grown up in refugee camps with only limited access to education and training services.

In addition most refugees have also been forced to leave their extended families, friends and communities behind. This results in the break down of social support networks exacerbated by feelings of grief and guilt. It is the refugees from the Horn of Africa, escaping civil war, that are facing the most difficult experiences during resettlement in Australia because of substantial language and cultural barriers.

For these refugees there are often major issues with literacy, employment, education and health upon resettlement as well as frequent incidences of problem gambling, domestic violence and substance abuse.

The MCNT believes that any additional administrative impost – such as through a formal citizenship test – is fundamentally unfair and unwarranted for these most vulnerable of new and emerging communities which are socially and economically disadvantaged.

The Social Consequences of the Introduction of a Formal Citizenship Test

As stated previously, the MCNT does not support the introduction of a formal citizenship test. The MCNT believes that a formal citizenship test will disadvantage and discriminate against migrants and refugees from non-English speaking countries. In terms of equity and social justice, the test will also place a higher burden on new arrivals than for recent citizens and the general population of Australia.

This test will create a group of second class citizens, and a sense of failure and alienation those who cannot pass the test, with potential serious implications for social cohesion and national security. The MCNT would contend that some Australian born citizens, including many Indigenous Australians, would struggle to pass a formal citizenship test.

The MCNT believes that the gaining of knowledge of Australian history and society and the understanding of life in Australia is indispensable to achieving successful integration in an inclusive society. This is a natural learning process for new settlers – and at varying rates for individuals – and the MCNT believes that this process should not be mandated, indeed may be compromised, through fast-tracked preparation for a formal citizenship test.

Australian Citizenship, English Language Literacy and Cultural Adjustment

For many refugees, particularly for young people, formal education has been interrupted by war and civil conflict as well as extended stays in refugee camps in Africa. For refugees from non-English speaking countries, there is often a lack of functional literacy in their native language. Even for refugees from English-speaking countries, there are often low levels of functional literacy in English upon arrival.

The culture of any group of people is multi-faceted, with language being just one of these facets. Equity, social justice and security of life in Australia for all residents are predicated upon the ready acceptance by migrants of Australian values and the Australian way of life, and the reciprocal acceptance by the mainstream community of new settlers.

The original culture of migrants and refugees always remains and is a defining element of personal identity. The process of cultural adjustment and the resultant blend of cultures from our immigrants over time have enriched mainstream Australian culture.

The MCNT does not believe that English language testing should be linked to citizenship. It is the MCNT's view that the forced learning of facts by rote for a formal citizenship test in itself will not automatically facilitate integration or social inclusion or the embrace of Australian values, and may in fact be counter-productive.

It is MCNT's view that qualification for Australian citizenship should not be based on a higher standard of English literacy than that which is applicable for many existing Australian citizens in the general population. Many refugees have specific difficulties with resettlement and the ability to learn that are not been currently adequately addressed by service providers.

New settlers from non-English speaking backgrounds are necessarily motivated for their own and their community's advantage to develop skills for effective communication with the mainstream community and to attain functional English literacy as it is a requirement to gain and retain employment, and to access services.

While MCNT welcomes the focus upon English literacy for new settlers and citizens, it is believed there are shortfalls in the delivery and accessibility of Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) courses, including clashes with work commitments, suitable child care, availability of transport to classes, and low levels of English proficiency and classroom experience for some groups of migrants and refugees.

Conclusion

Citizenship and national identity has always been fundamental to Australia's success as an immigrant society and is at the very heart of Australia's successful immigration and settlement policies.

Australia is regarded internationally as a successful model for social harmony and cultural inclusiveness. It is MCNT's view that under the current arrangements, the vast majority of new settlers over many years have successfully integrated into, and contributed to, the mainstream Australian society and economy. Citizenship should be regarded as much more than learning English and having an understanding of Australian history and society.

Citizenship is about commitment and contribution, about rights and responsibilities, and about a sense of belonging to, and identity within, a new society. The MCNT believes that a formal citizenship test will not prove a person's innate determination and ability to integrate into mainstream Australian society.