

A View on Citizenship

By Peter van Vliet - Executive Officer of the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria.

The Howard Government's recent citizenship paper raises some important issues for Australia's future. Few things are more important to a person's identity than their national citizenship.

Being an Australian citizen is like being part of the great Australian family. It carries rights as well as responsibilities. Citizenship gives you an Australian passport, more opportunities for employment and importantly a vote in elections to decide who rules over you.

For a good part of the twentieth century Australia operated a white Australian policy with an immigration test designed to keep non-British people out. In our more recent history we have had a non-discriminatory immigration policy.

Now the proposed stricter English language test raises the possibility of the White Australia Policy being reborn as the Anglo-Australia Policy. That is if you don't have very good English you can forget about Australian citizenship.

At face value it sounds popular and appears to have public support. But who will miss out? The local Greek barber with broken English who has been serving the local community proudly for decades can forget about it.

My older Italian friend, Giovanni, who emigrated around fifty years ago and has two children born in Australia who are public servants serving our nation, would have had to have waited much longer to be able to call this country his own.

A refugee from a war-torn African nation who is not literate in their own language will probably miss out. Like some troubled European nations, Australia could end up with permanent non-citizens—a possible underclass of discontent.

Some claim it's a 'tragedy' that some grandparents can't speak to their grandchildren in the same language. Personally I would be happy if my Dutch speaking grandparents were still alive to have a Heineken with. Whether we were conversing in perfect Oxford English or broken Anglo-Dutch wouldn't really bother me!

Besides many Australian-Greek kids speak to their grandparents in Greek not English. These wonder kids are part of Australia's bilingual success story which is great for our economy as well as our culture.

Up until now Australia wanted people in the citizenship tent not out of it. The federal government has previously spent millions of dollars trying to get people to become citizens. They recognised people were more likely to contribute if they were part of the family rather than in the guest house out the back.

But now the shutters are going back up. There may be a stricter test for English and a new test for so called Aussie 'values'. The waiting list for citizenship is set to blow out from two to four years because people are apparently being handed citizenship

like 'confetti'. As the Tampa episode shows, the reality is Australia's immigration program has never been more tightly controlled.

Australia is in the grips of a huge ageing and skills crisis. Tradespeople are set to become millionaires and soon getting a plumber will be like trying to see a heart surgeon. Our seniors' population is going through the roof due to the ageing of our baby boomers.

With these serious, looming economic issues Australia should welcome new citizens, not shun them. We need to maintain our economic prosperity. We will need more tax payers to help support our rapidly growing number of Australian retirees. Not all jobs will require great English language skills.

But the Government now wants to replace the 'welcome' mat with an arrow to the guesthouse out the back. Australia may well be the economic loser as migrants head to countries where they're made to feel welcome.

People who fail citizenship tests due to low level English will face real discriminatory barriers. This will include not having access to an Australian passport, which is critical for smooth overseas travel when visiting relatives or friends in other countries. Jobs in the federal public service and a chance to vote for who governs our nation are also unavailable to non-citizens.

Ironically by far the largest number of eligible resident non-citizens are from Great Britain. It seems English proficiency doesn't always correlate with a desire to take out Australian citizenship.

Debating Australian citizenship is important but let's be careful not to let go of the good things that have helped make Australia great. The Snowy Rivers Mountain Scheme, a large chunk of the Socceroos and around thirty percent of Victoria's five million strong population all came from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Some migrants don't have the skills to pick up great English but their children almost always do. As George Megalogenis noted in his recent book, the kids of post-war European migrants are often doing better economically than those of Australian born parents—so it's hard to argue our immigration program is not working.

Mastering the English language should be a goal we all aspire to so we can lead more productive lives in Australia. Even native born Australians should keep their English skills up. But let's not use a stricter English test to create insiders and outsiders in our society. Australia will be the poorer for it.

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