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Australian Citizenship – Your Right, Your Responsibility

Introduction

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the national peak body representing Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and their organisations. FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency to Government and the broader community. FECCA supports multiculturalism, community harmony, social justice and the rejection of all forms of discrimination and racism so as to build a productive and culturally rich Australian society. FECCA's policies are developed around the concepts of empowerment and inclusion and are formulated with the common good of all Australians in mind.

Becoming a citizen provides a gateway to full participation in the Australian community, including access to voting rights, other forms of political participation, freedom of movement and employment in the public service and Australian Defence Force. Citizenship is also a symbol of acceptance into the Australian community and is highly valued amongst immigrant groups, particularly refugees. Pathways to citizenship are thus an important element of social cohesion.

Citizenship eligibility and pledge

FECCA has previously opposed the extension of the residency requirement for citizenship eligibility when it was amended from two to four years, and again opposes any extension of this time period that the Government is considering. Extending this requirement will limit access to basic citizenship rights for many new migrants and humanitarian entrants.

We question the necessity of making changes to the Citizenship Pledge, including requiring more individuals to make the Pledge and adding words about allegiance to Australia. The

proposal to require a signed undertaking of the Pledge is particularly questionable as it is unclear what legal effect this undertaking would have.

Citizenship test

The proposal to standardise English language requirements for all new citizens will potentially disadvantage and exclude some people who have much to offer to Australian society, including:

- People who have experienced a very disrupted education in their country of origin, are illiterate in their own language, or who speak a language which is an oral language only;
- Older people;
- People living with disabilities that make learning another language challenging;
- People coming from countries of origin where English is not spoken or taught;
- Refugees who have experienced torture, trauma and/or long periods of displacement due to war or civil unrest. For many, post-traumatic stress makes learning another language very challenging;
- New migrants working long hours to support their families who cannot access English classes during working hours;
- Parents with young children and carers of other family members, including family members with a severe or profound disability, who cannot access classes unless other can pick up their caring responsibilities. These carers are predominantly women.

FECCA is concerned about other proposed changes to citizenship qualification, including limiting the number of times that an individual can sit the test and including questions about allegiance, the rule of law, values and democratic right and responsibilities. These changes are unnecessary, exclusionary, and have the potential to discriminate against people from countries with different political systems and traditions to Australia and non-English speaking backgrounds.

The citizenship test is a one-off test where an individual can achieve a pass or fail. The Government should consider implementing a more developed pre-citizenship process based on fundamental civics. This would not be a pass or fail activity, but rather an activity that would engage and empower migrants wishing to attain Australian citizenship.

A greater emphasis placed on civics and citizenship education as part of the process of attaining Australian citizenship would facilitate and enhance knowledge and understanding about Australia's democratic heritage, governance structures and political and legal institutions, the value of citizenship, as well as citizens' rights and responsibilities. This would be a long-term investment into supporting informed, empowered and active citizenship in Australia. Any such process should be mindful of the linguistic diversity and varying levels of English proficiency among prospective citizens, which could be addressed through bilingual education.

In view of its role nationally, FECCA would welcome an opportunity to work with the Government to develop and implement such a strength-based approach to citizenship.

Further, should citizenship testing continue, we recommend that it be delivered in different formats and settings, including in an oral only format, to meet a variety of different needs. Testing should be limited to:

- practical aspects of Australian life that will benefit all new citizens; and

- questions that Australian-born citizens would have a reasonable chance of answering correctly.

Revocation of citizenship for dual nationals engaged in terrorism

The *Australian Citizenship Amendment (Allegiance to Australia) Bill 2015* has been introduced into the Parliament and referred to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Intelligence and Security for consideration. FECCA will address the issue of revocation of citizenship for dual nationals engaged in terrorism through a submission to that committee.

Conclusion

FECCA highlights the importance of citizenship policy to achieving and maintaining social cohesion in the Australian community by giving migrants a sense of belonging and acceptance.

We oppose the discriminatory and unnecessary proposed changes to the citizenship test, pledge and eligibility criteria.

This review is an opportunity to consider a more substantive mode of citizenship eligibility than the completion of a one-off test, such as a strengths-based pre-citizenship process.