



## POLICY POSITION PAPER

### PROPOSED CHANGES TO AUSTRALIAN CITIZENSHIP LEGISLATION

FECCA is the national peak body that promotes multiculturalism, community harmony and social justice. We endorse multiculturalism as a core value that defines what it means to be Australian in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Our goal is to enrich and enhance Australian society through the fullest participation of all members of our community. We regard citizenship as a key to effective participation in community life.

Australian multiculturalism has been a strong shaping force in the development and maintenance of a cohesive Australian community. It has enjoyed bipartisan support over many years, with successive governments since the 1970s endorsing multiculturalism as a key policy framework. Indeed Australian multiculturalism has been the envy of many countries around the world.

FECCA believes that a socially cohesive, inclusive community must be nurtured. It takes integrated policy approaches and a commitment to equity, fairness and social justice for all Australians. In the current global climate, once social cohesion is undermined, it is difficult to rebuild. FECCA therefore advocates strongly for a continuing commitment to multiculturalism as a cornerstone in Australian social policy.

The Federal Government has recently released a discussion paper *Australian citizenship: much more than a ceremony - consideration of the merits of introducing a formal citizenship test*. The paper outlines a number of key changes to Australia's citizenship laws. FECCA agrees that there is merit in debating issues associated with citizenship in a constructive and positive way. However we are concerned that the current debate has the potential to polarise opinion, allowing conservative and divisive voices to be heard in a way that undermines community harmony and cohesiveness.

FECCA does have some strong concerns about the introduction of a formal citizenship test for Australia as follows:

#### Qualification period:

FECCA believes that there is little persuasive argument to support the extension of the qualification period for citizenship from 2 to 4 years. There is no clear evidence that waiting 4 years will create any benefits either for

the Australian community as a whole, or for migrants and humanitarian entrants wishing to become citizens.

A major impact of this extension is that migrants and humanitarian entrants must wait 4 years before being able to work with the Australian Public Service. This will disadvantage prospective citizens by limiting their employment options. It will also negatively impact on Australia's ability to effectively utilise the skills of our multilingual and multicultural workforce.

English language testing:

FECCA does not believe that English language testing should be linked to citizenship.

We welcome an increasing focus on English language acquisition, and look forward to greater funding to support English language tuition for new migrants and humanitarian entrants. A working knowledge of English is important to being able to participate fully in Australian life. However, there are countless examples of people who despite their limited English language skills have made important economic and social contributions, providing valued services and becoming valued Australian citizens.

Australia's multilingual workforce gives us a competitive edge in the global marketplace. It provides a window to the world, deepening our ability to engage with countries where languages other than English are spoken. Workers who speak languages other than English enrich our workplaces and ensure more effective and responsive service delivery to our culturally and linguistically diverse Australian community.

Anyone who has attempted to learn another language would know that language acquisition and fluency takes time and a supportive and flexible educational environment that allows regular practice of skills. We argue that the current proposal to link citizenship and English languages skills will potentially disadvantage and exclude some people from becoming citizens, particularly:

- New migrants working long hours to support their families who cannot access English classes during working hours, and are ineligible for social welfare payments,
- Parents with young children or carers of other family members, who cannot access classes unless others can pick up their caring responsibilities,
- 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, requiring an extended time period and flexible delivery of English language programs,
- 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, and

- People living with disabilities that making learning another language challenging.

A much greater investment in English language tuition programs that are flexible and are able to meet people's differing needs and learning styles is needed.

Demonstrated knowledge of Australian history, values, customs and traditions and laws

FECCA agrees that it is vital that new migrants and humanitarian entrants have the opportunity to develop an understanding of life in Australia, through orientation programs that can be accessed both pre-embarkment and on arrival in Australia.

Australia's current multicultural policy specifically refers to four underpinning principles that all Australians, whatever their background, need to respect. These are:

- Responsibilities for all - a civic duty to respect the structures and principles of Australian society, including that Australia is a secular society,
- Respect for each person - subject to the law, Australians have the right to express their own culture and beliefs, and an obligation to respect the rights of others to do the same,
- Fairness for each person - equality of treatment and opportunity - including the right to freedom from discrimination, and
- Benefits for all- all Australians benefit from productive diversity and the cultural, social and economic dividends of our diversity.

Likewise, Australian citizenship includes both rights and responsibilities. Australian citizens must obey Australian laws, enrol to vote and vote in elections, serve on a jury if asked to do so and defend Australia if the need arises.

As a citizen, you have the right to access government services that you are entitled to, free of any form of discrimination irrespective of your country of birth, language, culture, race or religion. You also have the right to vote, stand for parliament, work in the Australian Public Service, serve in the armed forces, apply for an Australian passport, and to seek assistance from Australian diplomatic representatives while overseas.

The present pledge for citizenship underlines this, stating:

*From this time forward (under God), I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people, whose democratic beliefs I share, whose rights and liberties I respect, and whose laws I uphold and obey.*

Becoming a citizen does provide a gateway to full participation in the life of the Australian community. It is therefore essential that people are able to

access information about citizenship in a range of community languages other than English, and to develop a good understanding of not only the responsibilities, but also the rights of Australian citizens.

The current discussion paper questions whether citizens should be required to demonstrate a commitment to Australian values. FECCA argues that values such as freedom, a fair go, democracy, respect for the rule of law, tolerance, mutual respect, political equality, equal opportunity and non-discrimination are not uniquely Australian. They are universal values that help to create a cohesive society, which is mature enough to acknowledge and celebrate diversity and difference.

Values are not fixed in time. The contributions of Indigenous Australians, migrants and refugees have enriched and changed our values throughout our history, shaping our Australian way of life.

We look forward to examining the discussion paper in closer detail and will be submitting a submission responding to the discussion paper which will be available through our website at <http://www.fecca.org.au/Submissions/index.html>.

We encourage organisations and individuals to access the discussion paper at [http://www.citizenship.gov.au/news/discussion\\_paper.htm](http://www.citizenship.gov.au/news/discussion_paper.htm) and to lodge a submission by the 17 November 2006.