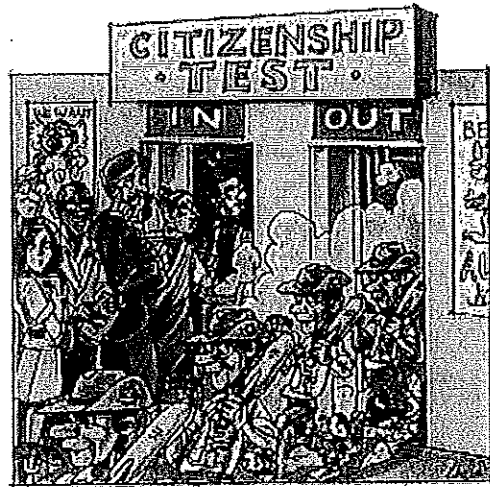


Citizenship test is no joke

TONY SMITH FEBRUARY 11, 2008

The Rudd Government should immediately abolish the tests introduced by the Howard Government to determine eligibility for Australian citizenship. The tests have deterred applicants, discriminate between immigrants on several criteria including country of origin and type of visa, and embarrass the rest of us. It must be possible to find alternatives that achieve the better purposes of the tests.

When the tests were proposed, many sets of likely questions appeared. It was easy to satirise the tests because various policies of the Howard Government suggested it wanted 'people like us' (PLU) to qualify for citizenship while excluding the non-PLU. The choice of a test also reflected the hard nosed approach to determining merit that the government applied to education and to social welfare.



The most sinister aspect of the tests was the possibility that the government wished to move away from a human rights based approach towards reciprocity. The notion that people acquire civil and political rights simply by being born involves Australia in all sorts of messy procedures such as rescuing boat people and providing overseas aid. It would be tidier, simpler and more efficient to have a system of responsibilities that began and ended with Australian citizens. Unfortunately, the tidy approach is often the most inhumane.

The government's attitude was demonstrated clearly enough in its moves to prevent asylum seekers using Australian appeal processes, and in its complicity in allowing the US administration to deny its terror suspects, such as David Hicks, access to courts.

Tests, including language tests, have been used in the past to exclude people for political reasons. The treatment of anti-fascist campaigner Egon Kisch in 1934 was a most bizarre case of politics masquerading as bureaucracy. To escape the condemnation of non-British Europeans, immigration regulations allowed for the testing of visitors in any European language. Kisch was an expert in several languages, and so the government of the day exploited the benign clause to apply a test in a Scots dialect.

While the case had many complications, surely one lesson was that governments should not be allowed to implement policies that are an open invitation to cynical exploitation.

The elites who run Australia have traditionally ignored issues of citizenship. The Constitution granted by the British left us as subjects of the crown, not as republican citizens encouraged to decide our own destiny. Until recently, there has been bipartisan avoidance of genuine commitment to civics education. No-one would, or should, seriously suggest tests for Australian born citizens, so it is difficult to justify the demand for others to be conversant with our history, traditions and system of government.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference recently condemned the tests. It suggested instead a series of 'formation sessions' in which applicants could learn about Australian values and the responsibilities of citizenship. This seems to be a practical suggestion that deserves serious consideration.

Such sessions could have a sense of equity about them if they ran parallel to ongoing voluntary civics education programs for the Australian born. They could be conducted by professionals in adult education, who are accustomed to operating sensitive programs under open scrutiny. And they would enable genuine feedback to take place through questioning and general discussions.

All dedicated teachers know learning is a two way process and that teachers can be intermediaries between their students and society. Such sessions would produce genuine side benefits for the learners and the system. Learners would come to understand the unwritten conventions that bind society and not just the literal meanings in booklets. This would enable them to become independent more quickly and so to contribute to society. Hearing the concerns of the learners could lead to improvements in the provision of general government services.

A test, by contrast, can achieve only a limited range of educational objectives. It ignores cultural norms and pretends that literacy is not an issue.

The Labor Party achieved office last year amid great optimism. The adoption of a program of social inclusion is a legitimate step towards addressing concerns that many Australians were relatively deprived, if not completely excluded, by government policy over the previous decade or so.

But when Prime Minister Rudd jokes about the need to retain questions on mid-20th century cricket and the Minister for Immigration insists Labor will retain the citizenship test, the new government's credibility on issues of inclusion is damaged. A citizenship test is an instrument for creating hierarchies, divisions and exclusion.

Tony Smith holds a PhD in political science. He has taught at several universities, most recently at the University of Sydney.

Make Your Own Australian Citizenship Test

