

***Submission on the Federal Government's
Consideration of the Merits of
Introducing a Formal Citizenship Test***

Submission by the

**Youth Affairs Network
of Queensland**



November 2006

Introduction

The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc. (YANQ) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response on the consideration of the merits of introducing a formal citizenship test.

However, YANQ opposes the introduction of a formal test for all people, including people applying for Australian citizenship, permanent residents, long term temporary residents, student visa holders and humanitarian programme entrants.

The Australian Government's discussion paper undermines the efforts undertaken to advance reconciliation and multiculturalism, both being crucial elements in supporting cultural harmony and strengthening social cohesion within the Australian society.

YANQ believes that introducing a test that only favours the white Australian culture is discriminatory against not only those who are non-white Australians but also the Indigenous people of Australia to who which this country belongs. Moreover, YANQ is concerned that the current debate surrounding citizenship and Australian values is fuelling conservatism and division within communities.

This submission directly responds to a number of key questions contained in the Australian Government's Discussion Paper, *Australian Citizenship: Much more than a ceremony*. This submission draws on feedback that YANQ has received from its members and networks throughout Queensland.

About YANQ

The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc. (YANQ) is the peak community youth affairs organisation in Queensland. YANQ advocates on behalf of young people in Queensland, especially disadvantaged young people, to government and the community. The interests and well being of young people across the state are promoted by YANQ in the following ways:

- disseminating information to members, the youth sector, and the broader community;
- undertaking campaigns and lobbying;
- making representations to government and other influential bodies;
- resourcing regional and issues-based networks;
- consulting and liaising with members and the field;
- linking with key state and national bodies;
- initiating projects;
- hosting forums and conferences;
- input into policy development; and
- enhancing the professional development of the youth sector.

Summary

YANQ strongly opposes the introduction of a formal citizenship test.

There is no firm or sufficient evidence to suggest that a completing a formal test will equate to one's full participation in Australian life as Australian citizens.

More concerning is the motivation behind the current debate on citizenship and Australian values, which builds on the conservative and fear-based policies that discriminate against those who are non-Anglo Saxon yet they are willing to contribute economically, socially and culturally to the Australian society.

YANQ's concerns relating to the Australian Government's discussion paper are summarised in the following points:

- YANQ believes that there is an anti-multiculturalism motive supporting the current proposal to introduce the formal citizenship test, as indicated by the conservative undertones of the discussion paper. Such motives undermine past efforts undertaken to advance reconciliation and multiculturalism.
- The discussion paper is does not acknowledge Indigenous people and their culture as the founding base for building and strengthening Australia's cultural diversity.
- There is a strong shift from 'multiculturalism' to 'integration', which can be seen as a revival of the past assimilation policies. What economic and social benefits will be gained from assimilation?
- Currently, AMEP is not accessible and is inflexible in its delivery. The model of program delivery requires review to reflect the needs of people from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- There is lack of resources and funding available to assist refugee young people with literacy, numeracy and English language. Due to interrupted or lack of schooling, refugee young people require additional support to complete their education.
- An understanding of Australia's way of life is not enhanced through a test. The Australian Government should be investing its resources in supporting multiculturalism rather than on a formal test. Australia's way of life and values are based on the principles of human rights.
- The existing Australian Citizenship Pledge is a sufficient form of commitment to Australia, its people and democratic values. If the Australian Government wants full assurance that all those seeking citizenship will commit to the Australian way of life, then it needs to make a commitment to investing in resources, services and programs that are culturally responsive to the needs of the population.

Detailed Response

Question 1. Should Australia introduce a formal citizenship test?

No. There is no evidence to suggest that a test will be a meaningful measure of a person's participation in Australian society.

The question of whether to introduce a formal citizenship is driven by conservative and anti-multicultural agenda. The current debate builds on fear and marginalises individuals and groups who are from non-Anglo Saxon communities yet they have made significant economic, social and cultural contributions to the contemporary Australian society.

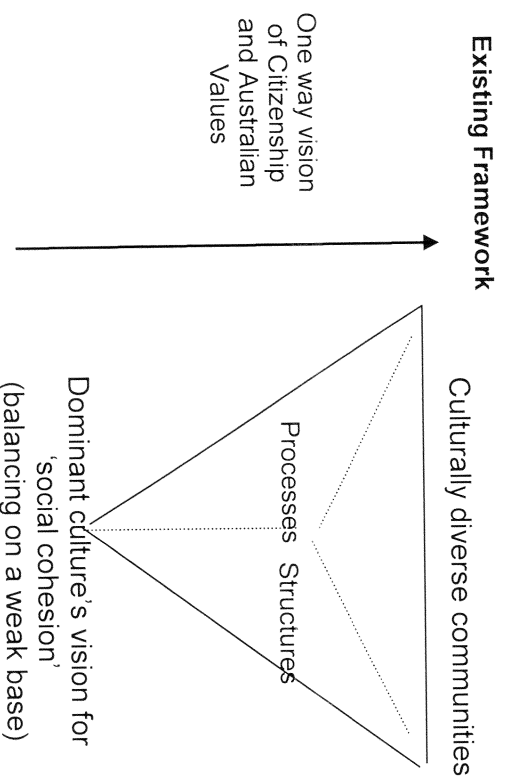
Question 2. How important is knowledge of Australia for Australian citizenship?

First and foremost, YANQ believes that any discussion on Australian citizenship should fully recognise Indigenous culture as the first culture of Australia. YANQ is of the view that current debate on Australian values and citizenship test is set within a fear-based socio-political climate due to:

- Lack of acknowledgement of the Indigenous culture as the basis for fostering cultural harmony and civic participation;
- The existence of a major power imbalance between cultures;
- The dominance of the Anglo-Saxon culture in processes, systems and institutions; and
- Lack of cultural equity, limiting the participation of minority cultures in contributing to policy development and decision making processes.

Based on the above, YANQ believes that the Australian Government's proposal for a formal citizenship test is ingrained in the conservative policies decided by the dominant White Anglo-Saxon culture of which minority cultures become subjects of prejudice and discrimination.

This inevitably has led to the term 'multiculturalism' being questioned for its definition and legitimacy. It is clear then that within the existing dominant structure, minority cultural groups are being forced to 'integrate' (in other words 'assimilate') rather than embracing their rich cultural and linguistic skills and heritage. YANQ describes the conservative model currently in place can be depicted as an upside down triangle, with a fragile and weak founding base (see diagram below).

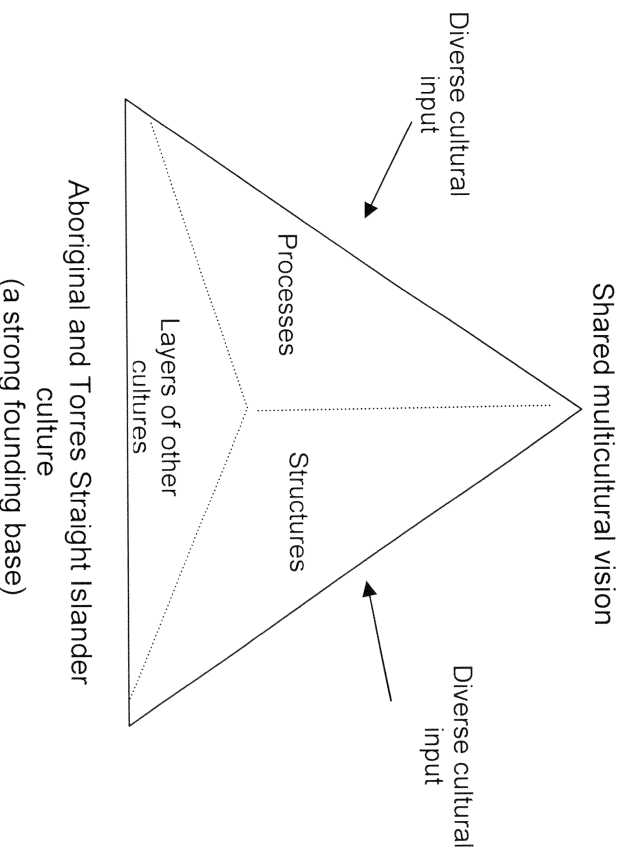


In the above framework, culturally diverse communities cannot identify with the dominant culture's vision for 'social cohesion', becoming distant from the vision itself.

To counter the existing framework for multiculturalism, YANQ firmly believes that the first culture of Indigenous people must be acknowledged as a basis for multiculturalism, ensuring that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are recognised for their influential role in laying the foundation for cultural diversity in Australia.

YANQ sees the need for diverse cultural input into citizenship policies in order to achieve a shared understanding and commitment to multiculturalism in Australia. At the moment there is only a one sided view of citizenship, Australian values and 'integration'. The diagram below depicts the framework which opposes the current conservative model.

Inclusive Framework for Multicultural Australia



Question 3. What level of English is required to participate as an Australian citizen?

YANQ is in strong belief that people from non-English backgrounds, particularly people arriving on humanitarian program visas require additional support in English language, literacy and numeracy.

YANQ has extensively documented and advocated on the educational needs of students from refugee backgrounds. With limited prior schooling, refugee students are experiencing difficulties 'catching up' on literacy and numeracy as well as acquiring their skills in the English language. YANQ has received concerns from schools, TAFE and multicultural youth service providers that the Australian education system assigns students to school grades according to their chronological age. As some refugee students have little schooling, their needs and school experience needs to be taken into account.

Moreover, the existing Adult English Migrant Program (AMEP) is inflexible in its delivery. Students enrolled in AMEP may stop attending classes once they obtain employment as AMEP is, in most cases, delivered during work hours. Assistance with child care as well as after-work

delivery of AMEP will improve retention and accessibility. More funding and resources are needed to offer AMEP that is responsive to the needs of its clients.

Additionally, it has been reported to YANQ over the last two years that refugee young people aged 17 and over prefer to go to an intensive language school despite being older than the school's acceptance age. If young people choose to go to school, they forfeit their access to AMEP through TAFE. Whilst opportunities to co-deliver AMEP between schools and AMEP are being considered, there is an urgent need to ensure young people from refugee backgrounds have access to affordable, flexible and appropriate literacy, numeracy and English language programs.

Extra resources for AMEP and related multicultural services are also required for regional areas. Such support should be complemented by mainstream education, health, employment, housing and other social services.

Question 4. How important is a commitment to Australia's way of life and values for prospective Australian citizens?

How important is a commitment to the Indigenous people of Australia and Indigenous values for Australian Government? Focusing on an Anglo-Saxon view of Australia without the acknowledgement for Australia's first culture is not reflective of the rich cultural diversity which exists in Australia.

An understanding of Australia's way of life is not enhanced through a test. Living within a safe, supportive and multicultural environment creates opportunities for learning and sharing ideas and cultures. Through such environments, people reinstate their commitment to mutual respect, responsibility and civic participation. Therefore, the Australian Government should be investing its resources in supporting multiculturalism rather than on a formal test.

Australia's way of life and values are based on the principles of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all human beings are equal in dignity and rights regardless of their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, birth or other status. However, the current discussion on Australian values and citizenship is an attempt to marginalise and restrict the freedom of Australia's culturally diverse communities – human rights principles must be upheld to prevent division and fragmentation within communities.

Question 5. What form should a commitment to Australian values take?

The existing Australian Citizenship Pledge is a sufficient form of commitment to Australia, its people and democratic values. If the Australian Government wants full assurance that all those seeking citizenship will commit to the Australian way of life, then it needs to make a commitment to investing in resources, services and programs that are culturally responsive to the needs of the population. Can the Australian Government make this commitment to a 'fair go' and equality for all?