City of Port Phillip Submission
to the
Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

In response to:

Australian Citizenship:  
Much more than a ceremony

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Submitted by:
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on behalf of the City of Port Phillip

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SUMMARY

The City of Port Phillip has a proud history of welcoming new citizens, refugees and asylum seekers into our community. We value the diverse cultural, economic and social contributions made by our multicultural members.

We are honoured to hold citizenship ceremonies each month and share in this sense of pride with our new citizens. They are excited and appreciative about becoming Australian citizens and are keen to learn about our country. We believe that learning about our culture and way of life is something that needs to be supported and encouraged and can be achieved only after living in Australia.

Australia is a multicultural society, one that should celebrate the richness of its diversity. We should not be putting up further barriers to becoming a citizen by introducing a formal citizenship test.

In summary:
- Introducing a formal citizenship test would produce exclusivity and will not demonstrate a person’s capability as an active citizen.
- Knowledge of democracy and a level of understanding of Australian law may be beneficial to new migrants but should not be mandated.
- English proficiency should not be linked with citizenship. English language programs should be supported and encouraged.
- Values cannot be defined or tested. People learn about values and way of life after living in the prospective country.

Accordingly, we would not support the introduction of a formal citizenship test.
INTRODUCTION

About the City of Port Phillip

The City of Port Phillip is a municipality located on the northern shore of Port Phillip Bay in Melbourne. The area spans 11km of foreshore and takes in a variety of urban areas close to some of Melbourne's most popular beaches. With about 88,000 residents, the city is noted for its rich social, cultural and ethnic diversity.

Areas included in our municipality are:
- Elwood and part of Ripponlea
- Balaclava and East St Kilda,
- St Kilda,
- Albert Park and Middle Park,
- South Melbourne
- Port Melbourne and Garden City
- Part of St Kilda Road.

The City of Port Phillip promotes positive community relationships. As well providing a range of services and advice to assist people from non-English speaking backgrounds, the council works hard to provide our community with information on which to base its own thinking on multicultural issues.

Citizenship Ceremonies in the City of Port Phillip

One of the City of Port Phillip roles is to perform the Citizenship Ceremony for prospective citizens who reside in our municipality, on behalf of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The City of Port Phillip places high importance on Australian citizenship and we welcome approximately 45 new citizens each month. The Council also holds a special ceremony on Australia Day.

Citizenship ceremonies have an important symbolic role not only because they formally welcome new citizens from many different cultures but also because they signify the inclusion, rights and privileges that come with being an Australian citizen.

The ceremony is the formal part of the citizenship process but for many new citizens it is also an opportunity to convey their sense of pride in becoming an Australian. New citizens are invited to bring friends and family and a reception is held in their honour. They are also encouraged to meet fellow migrants and share their experiences.

The Mayor and Councillors as well as Federal and State politicians attend each ceremony. The Mayor presents each new citizen with an Australian Citizenship Certificate as well as Australian Flag and a native plant.

A representative from the Australian Electoral Commission is in attendance at every ceremony to enrol new citizens to vote. One of the most important aspects of becoming a citizen of Australia and in encouraging active citizenship is the right to vote.

It is also an opportunity for the Council to acknowledge the people and elders of the Eastern Kulin Nation, who have traditional connections and responsibilities for the land that the City of Port Phillip now occupies. A Boomerang elder attends the ceremony to explain traditions and their significant association with the City of Port Phillip. The
elder also presents new citizens with a gum leaf to symbolise permission to use and care for the land from the tops of the trees to the roots in the ground.
The submission considers in turn each of the four questions from the community discussion paper.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS:

QUESTION 1:

Should Australia introduce a formal citizenship test?

No.

The council proposes that a formal citizenship test would alienate people and fuel division. We believe that a danger in enforcing this test is exclusiveness. Individuals who have better access to education and more familiarity with the English language in their own countries will have a better chance of becoming Australian citizens.

Many individuals may be barred for little reason. The council believes that testing on the criteria of knowledge of Australia, English functionality and demonstrated commitment to Australian values will not suitably demonstrate capability as an active citizen.

A formal citizenship test would not take into account different needs of prospective citizens. Consideration needs to be given to cultural sensitivities, refugee/asylum seeker experiences prior to arrival, access to education in their original country, illiteracy, people with learning difficulties, young families or older people.

The City of Port Phillip believes that the Federal Government needs to establish that any citizenship test is consistent with international legal standards. Australia has international obligations - when assessing citizenship applications - to ensure that there is no cultural discrimination in this decision-making process.

The current system of Australian Citizenship Act 1948 requires most applicants to have spent a specified period of time in Australia. An understanding of the nature of the application, knowledge of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship, and knowledge of the English language demonstrated at the interview. This process for citizen application is sufficient.

It is also important to note that Australian born citizens are not subject to a formal test on their knowledge of Australian society, way of life or level of English.

Multiculturalism is one of Australia’s greatest achievements. Our diversity should be celebrated and our differences valued. Introducing a formal citizenship test will not define an active and participating citizen.
QUESTION 2:

**How important is knowledge of Australia for Australian citizenship?**

The current level of questioning in the citizenship interview is sufficient.

It is possible for a prospective citizen to make the commitment to Australia contained in the Pledge – and to fully participate in Australian society as a citizen – without first having knowledge of Australia, our democratic beliefs and our way of life.

Prospective citizens should have a level of understanding and respect for Australian law. This would be beneficial for newly settled migrants to assist participation in the community as well as exercising their own democratic rights as citizens.

Knowledge of democracy and civic duties should be encouraged but this is just one aspect of our culture and we do believe that this should be mandated in a formal test.

The current process already requires prospective citizens to have an adequate knowledge of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship. And as required by legislation (*Australian Citizenship Act 1948*) all applicants over the age of 18 years must be of good character.

Support is needed for new Australians to integrate into Australian community. The City of Port Phillip supports the establishment of pre-citizenship training and recommends that prospective citizens have an opportunity to develop understanding of Australian life through programs before and after their arrival.

Further resources should be put into settlement services and school programs assisting new migrants. Systems will need to be set in place to ensure that the training is financially and socially available to all prospective citizens.
QUESTION 3:

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

We do not believe that attaining a certain level of English proficiency should be linked with citizenship.

The *Australian Citizenship Act 1948* provides that applicants may be assessed as meeting the English language requirements if they are able to speak and understand English sufficiently to respond in simple language during the citizenship interview. The English language requirements required for this interview are adequate.

People are able to participate in everyday situations within the community and fulfill their responsibilities and privileges as Australian citizens using the same level of English required for this interview.

A working knowledge may be beneficial but it must also be acknowledged that many migrants have made important social and economic contributions with limited use of the language.

A formal English test will also exclude migrants that have come from a background with little or no access to the English language in their native country. The test could exclude:
- People suffering hardship including asylum seekers
- Illiterate people and those with learning difficulties
- Families with young children
- Low wage earners
- Full-time workers

The council believes that the focus of Federal Government should be on increased financial support and encouragement toward English language programs.

There are three Neighbourhood Centres within Port Phillip that provide English language training. These Centres currently receive State Government funding for 39 hours per week of English language classes for migrants. This means that each migrant will have only four to eight hours per week of tuition.

The City of Port Phillip is experiencing a new community of refugees including an increased number from Sudan. There is already an unmet demand for English tuition for migrants living in the City of Port Phillip. Without adequate funding these resources are being further stretched.

English language programs should be available as an option – not compulsory - to migrants applying for permanent residency or citizenship. They should also be available to migrants once their residency or citizenship has been accepted.

Many newly settled migrants would have limitations on time and finances. Therefore, consideration should be given to providing services and programs that are economically and socially available to all migrants.

QUESTION 4:
How important is a demonstrated commitment to Australia’s way of life and values for those intending to settle permanently in Australia or spend a significant period of time in Australia?

All citizens should have an understanding of the diversity and different values of Australian society but this should not be legislated.

Prospective citizens should have an opportunity to develop an understanding of Australian values. Values identified in a formal citizenship test would not suitably demonstrate understanding or knowledge of life in Australia or build acceptance and tolerance.

There are universal values and principles that define the standards within society, most importantly honesty and truth in governance. These standards provide the framework for all citizens of Australia including basic values such as the need to respect the law and recognise democracy.

City of Port Phillip believes that learning about our values may be necessary for effective settlement but not necessary to be an active citizen. People learn about values and way of life after living in the prospective country.

The council does not consider that signing a pledge to uphold Australian values and to fully participate in Australian life is necessary. There is a pledge to uphold Australian law in the current citizenship process that is sufficient.

The council would support and encourage education through a civics program, schooling or adult education but this should not be mandatory.

Currently permanent residents are required to spend two years in Australia before applying to become an Australian citizen. There are no clear benefits for extending this period of time to four years.

This will only create further hardship for prospective citizens by prolonging the period that they can be employed by certain sections of the workforce including public service. This extension would not only reduce employability opportunities for prospective citizens but will also limit the skills selection available to employers.

The delay in being unable to apply for an Australian passport or seek Australian diplomatic assistance may also make overseas travel difficult.