



Australian Government

Moving forward... Improving Pathways to Citizenship

Government response to the Report by the
Australian Citizenship Test Review Committee
November 2008

Government's Response to Australian Citizenship Test Review

An independent committee was appointed in April 2008, to review the Australian citizenship test following its initial six months of operation. The Committee was asked to consider ways to improve the test's operation and effectiveness.

The Report of the Australian Citizenship Test Review committee, *Moving forward...Improving Pathways to Citizenship*, made 34 recommendations to the Government.

The Review Committee made the valid point that an understanding of our civic responsibilities and what it means to be a citizen is of fundamental importance to all citizens, whether we are Australian by birth or by choice. This is a critical factor in nation building, particularly in our culturally diverse society.

The key recommendation of the report is that the Pledge of Commitment which people make when they become Australian citizens should be the centrepiece of citizenship testing. The Government agrees with and will adopt this recommendation. Focusing on the Pledge will enhance people's understanding of the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship.

Objectives of a citizenship test

The Government is committed to maintaining the citizenship test and agrees with the Review Committee's recommendation that citizenship testing be linked to the legal requirements for citizenship. The Government also supports the inclusion, where appropriate, of making the objectives of citizenship testing transparent.

Defining Basic Knowledge of the English Language

The Government remains committed to the requirement for prospective citizens to possess a basic knowledge of the English language and agrees with the Review Committee's recommended definition of basic English as having "a sufficient knowledge of English to be able to exist independently in the wider Australian community".

The Review Committee received a number of submissions that stated that the English language used in the current citizenship test resource book was of a much higher level than that of 'basic English', which is the required legislative standard. The Government agrees with the Committee that providing resources in plain English will support prospective citizens to prepare for the test. All related citizenship test resource material, including the resource book and questions will be developed in plain English.

Defining Adequate Knowledge of Australia and Responsibilities and Privileges of Australian Citizenship

The Review Committee's central recommendation is for the legislative requirement to have an "*adequate knowledge of Australia and of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship*" be linked to concepts and information people need to understand in order to make the Pledge of Commitment. The Government strongly supports having the Pledge as the centrepiece of Australian citizenship testing. The concepts contained in the Pledge lie at the heart of Australian citizenship and reflect the very core of a vibrant and healthy community of citizens.

The Pledge joins all Australians in a statement of unity and it is crucial that prospective citizens understand its concepts. The Government will base the new citizenship test on people's understanding of the concepts embodied within the Pledge.

The Government also agrees with the Review Committee that there should only be one resource book to support prospective citizens prepare for the citizenship test and that it should be written to reflect the concepts contained in the Pledge .

While the focus of the new test will be on the Pledge of Commitment it is also important to provide prospective citizens with broader information on Australia including Australia's history and notable Australians. To maximise this understanding, the Government fully supports the Committee's recommendation to redevelop the resource book in two separate sections – testable and non-testable.

The testable section, from which questions will be drawn, will cover concepts associated with the Pledge. The non-testable section of the resource book will contain broader information about Australia including Australian history and notable Australians. This will ensure that the resource book is more clearly structured and that information required to pass the test is clearly defined.

The Government supports the Review Committee's recommendation that the new resource book be developed by professional educators with experience in civics and citizenship education. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship will engage professional experts as soon as possible to commence work on the redrafting of the resource book with a view to completing the book and new test by August 2009.

As the focus of the new test will be the concepts and information required to make the Pledge of Commitment, the Government agrees with the Review Committee's finding that there should be no mandatory questions in the revised test. All testable information will be of equal importance and all new test questions will have equal weighting.

The Government is committed to new citizens having an adequate knowledge of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship as well as an adequate knowledge of Australia. In order to maintain the rigour of the citizenship test, the Government has decided to raise the pass mark from 60% to 75%. As such, the recommendation to keep the pass mark at 60% is not supported.

The Government will continue to monitor the Australian citizenship test including the content of the resource book.

Pathways to Citizenship

The Review Committee expressed concern that there are no alternative pathways to sitting a computer-based test which was in effect marginalising some people from becoming citizens. The Government is committed to ensuring people who have a commitment to Australia and who have a strong desire to become Australian Citizens have the opportunity to do so. The Government will develop a citizenship course that will provide an alternative pathway to citizenship for refugees and disadvantaged or vulnerable migrants. This will include people who understand English but whose level of literacy does not allow them to undertake a formal computer-based test.

This alternative pathway will address community concerns about the test and in many cases, will help people who were previously excluded from obtaining citizenship. It will ensure that the citizenship test caters for the needs of a broad range of people, particularly those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable. Equally the Government will provide educational support and a range of preparatory learning materials.

Migrants with better English are more successful at settling and finding employment. For these reasons, the Government does not support the recommendation for a citizenship education program in languages other than English.

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) will work with educational testing professionals to validate and ensure consistency of testing and assessment frameworks throughout pathways. The Government expects this process to be completed by 2010.

The Government does not support making the test questions publicly available. Maintaining the confidentiality of the test questions will ensure the integrity and rigour of the test is not diminished.

Exemptions and Earned Citizenship

The Committee recommended that a concept of “earned” citizenship be introduced. The Government does not support this recommendation as it believes that this concept would effectively introduce ‘classes’ of citizenship.

The Government did however accept the Review Committee’s recommendation that Section 21(3)(d) of the *Australian Citizenship Act 2007* be amended in the spirit of the Act to include an inability to demonstrate a basic knowledge of English and an adequate knowledge of Australia and of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship due to mental incapacity, resulting in those individuals not being required to sit a test. The Government agrees that there is a small group of individuals who suffer from psychological disorders as a direct result of having experienced torture and trauma. To assist these most vulnerable clients - many of whom need citizenship the most - the Government will amend Section 21(3)(d) of the *Australian Citizenship Act 2007* as recommended by the Review Committee.

Accessibility, Administration and Resourcing

The Review Committee recommended that the regional testing network be expanded and consideration be given to involving organisations which have a broad reach into regional and remote Australia. It also recommended the continuation and expansion of citizenship testing in Australian missions overseas. The department will review its regional and overseas testing arrangements to ensure clients have reasonable access to citizenship testing. The department will present cost-effective and sustainable options for possible improvements within 12 months.

The Government agrees with the Committee that an individual be required to be residentially eligible to sit a formal test and that processes be streamlined and realigned to combine citizenship testing with the citizenship application. The Government supports these recommendations as they will allow the process of applying for citizenship to, in most cases, be completed in one visit. The Government aims to have these changes implemented within 6 to 12 months.

Raising Community Awareness of the Citizenship Test

The Review Committee has recommended that DIAC develops and implements a coordinated information campaign to provide accurate information to prospective citizens to assist them through the citizenship testing and application process. The Government will take the opportunity presented by the 60th anniversary of the enactment of the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948* next year to promote the acquisition of Australian citizenship. Information will be provided as part of this campaign to assist the community in clearly understanding the process of acquiring Australian citizenship.

The Committee recommended that DIAC substantially strengthens its efforts in promoting the acquisition of citizenship by long-term eligible permanent residents. The Government supports in principle, the intent of this recommendation. This group will be included as part of the target audience in promoting the acquisition of Australian Citizenship throughout the 60th anniversary year in 2009.

The General Community and Citizenship – Beyond the Terms of Reference

The Australian Government affirms that knowledge of Australian citizenship and civic responsibilities are important for all Australians no matter how they became citizens.

Next year marks the 60th anniversary of the enactment of the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948*. This milestone provides a useful opportunity to promote the value of Australian citizenship to the wider community.

The Review Committee drew attention to the need to have a consistent education program on civics and citizenship and that it be implemented in all schools commencing at primary level.

Civics and citizenship education is a national priority in Australia. The Government supports in principle, the intent of this recommendation. If we expect new citizens to be tested on their civic responsibilities we should also ensure that we teach this to those who are born here. Work in this area is currently underway as a part of a whole-of-government approach to the promotion of civics and citizenship in the general community.

The Review Committee recommended that a Citizenship Convention be held in 2009 to mark the 60th Anniversary of the enactment of the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948*. This recommendation is not supported as a range of activities to celebrate the 60th anniversary year are already planned.

Interim Measures

The Government does not support a recommendation that the complete bank of current test questions should be published as soon as practicable. This is not supported as the Government is committed to maintaining the current test in its present form until the new test is in place.

The Government agrees with the Review Committee that Citizenship test administrators be kept up-to-date with new Minister's Determinations and changes to the ACIs through regular training, and through staff messages and staff meetings.