

## **Friends of STARTTS**

### **Comments on the Australian Citizenship Discussion Paper**

Friends of STARTTS believes that the system for conferring citizenship as it stands has served Australia very well and will continue to do so. In his foreword to the discussion paper, the Parliamentary Secretary justifiably refers to Australia's success in embracing millions of people from all around the world who have gone on to contribute immeasurably to Australia's development. This has been possible in the context of the current system for conferring citizenship operating, as it does, in the context of a vibrant multicultural society.

#### **1. Should Australia introduce a formal Citizenship test?**

The present system has proven its capacity to provide prospective citizens with a realistic understanding of what it means to become Australian and drawn in and attracted those that have arrived as refugees to fully participate in the life of the country. Many of those that have arrived as refugees and who have contact with the Friends of STARTTS' organisation express great pride at becoming Australian and the present system has played an important role in achieving this.

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

A citizenship test in which respondents learn by rote the responses to various questions about Australia is not necessarily a good indicator of the understanding and commitment of refugees and migrants to Australia. It is rather more a test of one's capacity to repeat information and will by definition be a much more simple task for those that have the advantage of higher education. The discussion paper is correct in identifying the unifying force that citizenship is within a culturally diverse nation. The stated aims of encouraging social cohesion and maximising participation in society are extremely important and laudable. While the aims of fostering social cohesion and providing opportunity are to be lauded, we are concerned about the proposed means of achieving them.

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

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

The description of the values listed in the discussion paper as Australian values is of some concern to us. Many of the values listed are essentially values espoused by most liberal democracies around the world and are therefore not uniquely Australian or especially *of* Australia. It would be appropriate to speak about these as values that underpin the Australian system of government and civil society. It is important to make this distinction because the act of defining something as an Australian value that prospective applicants should 'sign up' to suggests that at least some applicants for citizenship may not share such values. Rejecting an applicant for citizenship on the basis that one does not share a set of uniquely Australian values is of considerable concern especially if such values are vaguely defined or shared by the citizens of many other nations around the world. It potentially creates a situation in which a

person has been accepted as a permanent resident, is considered desirable to live among Australians by all the tests for the issuing a permanent visa and yet cannot become an Australian.

The experience of the Friends of STARTTS is that the values outlined in the document such as respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual and a commitment to the rule of law are precisely those things that actually *attract* people from around the world to make Australia their home. Our clients are seeking refuge from civil wars, regimes and systems of government in which values such as these are not upheld and so refugees have an acute sense of the freedoms living in and becoming Australian affords.

**6. What level of knowledge and understanding of the Australia way of life and English language skills should people have to be approved for permanent residence in Australia?**

**7. Should they be required to demonstrate this knowledge?**

Friends of STARTTS is not supportive of a citizenship test. However, if the Government is committed to introducing such a test then there must be adequate concessions made for many refugees particularly from situations of protracted conflict situations who in many cases have had limited or severely interrupted education. Friends of STARTTS is concerned that the process of testing a persons knowledge of Australia will actually be an impediment to refugees that have limited education or who are experiencing learning difficulties as a result of experiences of torture and trauma. An important principle to safeguard in any citizenship arrangements is to ensure that refugees and migrants are *attracted* to becoming citizens and that impediments to this are not placed along the path.

**9. Should the same be required for people to be approved for long term temporary residence in Australia, such as for business or study?**

**10. How important is commitment to Australia's way of life and values for permanent residents and long-term temporary residents?**

**11. What form should a commitment to Australian values take?**

Historically, the members of refugee communities have very high levels of commitment to and therefore uptake of Australian citizenship. Many refugees would remain stateless if denied Australia citizenship. Furthermore, given the injustices experienced by many humanitarian entrants in the country of origin couple with experiences of trauma, citizenship has become an important part of the process of rebuilding lives in a new country.

Indeed, those permanent residents that are reluctant or far less likely to wish to acquire citizenship have come from English speaking countries such as Great Britain and New Zealand.

It should also be noted that refugees by definition are forced by circumstances of war or persecution to move from the country of origin across borders and often into

refugee camps in which further deprivations are endured. Often the experiences of exile, dangerous journeys, protracted periods in limbo and finally resettlement are highly traumatic. Australia's refugee programme is therefore primarily a humanitarian commitment to people in desperate circumstances. The Friends of STARTTS does not believe it would therefore be appropriate or desirable to test the commitment to Australia of people in such desperate circumstances of refugee camps as a basis for determining whether entry is permitted. It is however, highly desirable for those applicants accepted to resettle in Australia to attend an appropriately timed and well structured orientation course in order to prepare for arrival in a new country.

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

**8. If so, how could they demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of Australia and their English language skills?**

**13. Should prospective Australian citizens be formally tested for their level of English? If so, would it be necessary to test oral, written, reading and listening skills?**

The opportunity to learn English is vital for newly arrived refugees and the initiatives of the Commonwealth through its support of the AMEP are very important to ensuring humanitarian entrants are able to grasp the wider opportunities available and participate to the fullest extent in Australian life. However, Friends of STARTTS again has some serious concerns about the practical implications of formally testing the English of people who have arrived as refugees as a basis for determining eligibility for citizenship. It is important that exemption provisions include recognition of the impact of torture and trauma experiences on second language acquisition. Other disadvantages include the situation of aged humanitarian entrants and the case of women who are caring for young children and for whom attendance at English classes is impacted by lack of adequate childcare and family pressures. Women in isolated circumstances should also be considered for exemptions.

**14. Should the requirement be expanded beyond needing a knowledge of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship and an understanding of the nature of the application? Should it instead encompass a broader knowledge of Australia?**

No, for reasons outlined above the Friends of STARTTS does not support expanded testing.

**15. If knowledge of Australia is considered important for Australian citizenship what elements do you think are necessary? For example, should people choosing to become Australians know something about our history; our culture and traditions; our common values; national symbols; our laws; and our Australian system of democracy? What other things do you think are important?**

**16. If a formal citizenship test were to be introduced, should certain groups (for example older people or long term residents) be exempt?**

In terms of exemption provisions for testing, Friends of STARTTS suggests that humanitarian entrants be granted citizenship on the basis that they have attended and completed the current citizenship course and that this be used as the sole basis for qualification in situations where people lack English language skills as the result of learning difficulties associated with experiences of trauma and torture.

It should be noted that currently many English speaking humanitarian entrants from countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia are not given the opportunity to attend the citizenship courses freely offered as part of English language tuition provided by the AMEP. This is anomaly that should be redressed.