Peter Dutton's push for 'Australian values' in citizenship test hurts freedom

Sarah Gill
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The Hon Peter Dutton’s first thought bubble for the year – a proposal to tighten up Australia’s citizenship test to crack down on would-be terrorists – suggests that 2017 is not going to be the year that our Immigration Minister starts showing any latent signs of lucidity. The way to stop looming jihadists from "exploiting migration pathways", according to Dutton – a man who previously predicted asylum seekers would simultaneously poach Aussie jobs and be unemployable – is for the citizenship test to place more emphasis on Australian values. If you’re as confused about what this means as I am, the minister has been helpful enough to elaborate: send your children to school, speak English – something of an obsession for Dutton, despite his own linguistic shortcomings – and get a job. Yes, the minister now expects you to find employment, even if it means "taking Australian jobs", presumably.

Illustration: Matt Davidson

Dutton’s proposal has been greeted with unbridled enthusiasm by One Nation leader Pauline Hanson, the self-appointed gatekeeper of what it means to be Australian. Hanson, who has spent the last two decades warning us that the shining pillar of solid Aussie virtue is under attack by Asians, Muslims, and squat toilets, had these pearls of wisdom to offer on the matter of citizenship and migrant literacy: "We are being taken for mugs in this country by opening up our doors … And [as for] English. If you can't communicate how can you expect anyone to assimilate into our society?" Just so. Notwithstanding the fact that those opening the debate are lacking the wherewithal to present a cogent, let alone coherent, argument, it is "a debate worth having", says Dutton. And something clearly needs to be done because, according to 7 News, "shocking new figures" show that "thousands of migrants fail the test each year" and – worse still – "are allowed to sit it over and over again". A bit like a driving test then, which a sizeable portion of Australians fail on the first attempt, except they’re typically encouraged to try again, rather than to pack it in because they’re not the sort of people we want on our roads. As for why so many aspiring citizens are attempting the test "over and over" – it’s something of a mystery in light of Hanson’s claim that "they give you the answers anyway". But maybe it’s because those sitting the test desperately want to belong here? Or perhaps it’s because the citizenship test relies, to an inexplicable extent, on Australian sporting icons and dates that the majority of those born here would fail to correctly identify.

Maybe, even, it's because the test is "flawed, intimidating to some, and
discriminatory", according to a review conducted in 2008, and the updated version, which "ignored most of the crucial recommendations", still discriminates against the humanitarian program intake; the same cohort, let's be honest, that Dutton has firmly in his sights.

The same individuals may well be disadvantaged by Dutton's so-called "Australian values test" – because many of those in the humanitarian intake have had few, if any, educational opportunities in their country of origin, and subsequently may have fewer employment opportunities here – even though, in the longer term, they demonstrate "strong entrepreneurial qualities" and their children are more likely to go on to complete tertiary studies than the children of skilled migrants and Australian-born contemporaries.

And on the obscure but nonetheless persistent topic of "Australian values" – just what does the minister mean? Which values, exactly? What aspects of the national cultural identity should newcomers be required to adopt, to meld with?

The so-called "larrikin spirit" perhaps, which at its core, let's face it, has a healthy disregard for convention and distrust for authority? Or the values reflected in our unofficial national anthem – which celebrates an itinerant labourer who steals a sheep then drowns himself rather than submit to officers of the law? Probably not.

One Nation's "Australian values" then, which declare, somewhat perplexingly, that "Australia is for Australians", or its avowed support for "freedom of thought, expression, initiative, association, and exchange", which presumably doesn't extend to either the eating or the certification of halal food or the wearing of the burqa.

But maybe Dutton is referring to those ideals set forth by Immigration and Border Protection, including the "spirit of egalitarianism that embraces mutual respect, tolerance, fair play and compassion for those in need" – values that may be conspicuously absent from the minister's own pronouncements and his dealings with refugees, but are helpfully summarised in his department's "Australian values statement" that aforementioned refugees are duly required to sign. Who knows? It's not clear what the minister means, or what dystopian future he has in mind. Which is the worrying part.

There's nothing wrong with wanting new citizens to share certain values in order that we can all get along together harmoniously: equality, for instance, or tolerance, respect for diversity, and inclusion – although, to be honest, we've got a way to go there ourselves. There's nothing wrong, either, with wanting to exclude those who've declared a clear desire to do us harm.

But here's the thing: it's not just that we can't compel everyone to swallow our ideals, by hook or by crook – and no amount of instruction or official government statements, no test, nor enhanced state screening or scrutiny can ever achieve that goal.

It's that in sanctioning how people must behave to demonstrate their worthiness – prescribing what they are permitted to do or wear, to eat, or to speak and in what language – we undermine the most important freedom of all. And that freedom – to be the same, or to be different – just happens to be the thing at the core of the democracy that we want all Australian citizens to cherish.

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