A ‘tougher’ citizenship test should not be used to further divide and exclude

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Immigration Minister Peter Dutton recently raised the prospect of changing the law around acquiring Australian citizenship. He acknowledged the vast majority of migrants are well-integrated, and should be fast-tracked for citizenship. However, Dutton would like to see criteria tightened to deny citizenship to those who have not integrated into Australia.

While details are unclear, he referred to people involved in serious crime, those who are welfare-dependent, or who have links with extremism. Dutton was also concerned about people who don’t undertake English lessons or prevent their children from being educated.

**What’s the point of citizenship?**
Permanent residents in Australia enjoy almost the full range of civil and political rights as citizens. They have access to the welfare system (after initial waiting periods), Medicare, and education.
Citizens alone are able to vote and have a greater security of residence. They are subject to removal only if they have fought for the armed forces of an enemy country or, since 2014, if they are involved in activity defined to be linked with terrorism.

Citizenship is important for people to feel fully connected and committed to Australia. For some – in particular refugees – the increased security of residence is of extremely high importance, given they are unable to return to their countries of origin for fear of persecution.

For those who came to Australia by boat, citizenship is the only pathway to sponsoring family members to join them.

**The pathway to citizenship**
Citizenship is the final step in a process of becoming a full member of the Australian community. There are many checks along the way.

When Australia admits permanent residents, the expectation is that they will stay permanently and take up citizenship at some point in the future. When permanent residents become citizens it is a marker of their successful integration.

Knowing that permanent residents are likely to be future citizens, Australia makes difficult policy choices around the balance of skilled, family reunion and humanitarian migration.

The government sets a target for the maximum number of new residents each year, and visa-holders are subject to rigorous checks to ensure they meet the criteria for those visas. These checks include detailed security and character assessments.

By the time a permanent resident is in a position to apply for citizenship, they must have lived in Australia for four years and have remained of good character during that time. If they do not remain of good character, their visa may be cancelled and they can be removed to their country of origin.

The immigration minister regularly exercises this power – even, controversially, in relation to long-term permanent residents with children in Australia.

Also, as part of eligibility for citizenship, a person must be of “good character” and must provide national police checks. The Department of Immigration can also...
request Interpol and overseas police checks.

**Are citizenship tests the best way?**

In 2007, the Howard government introduced a citizenship test to help determine whether applicants satisfied two further requirements for citizenship. They must have:

- a “basic knowledge” of English; and
- “an adequate knowledge of Australia and of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship”.

Citizenship tests are not well-suited to testing an applicant’s “values”. They are also a crude measure of an applicant’s level of English. Australia’s test no longer contains questions about cricketer Don Bradman, after it was reviewed in 2008. It now focuses on knowledge of the institutions of government, and of basic constitutional values such as free speech.

Being able to rote learn these values is not an indication that a person lives by them. And the language of values and rights is complicated, and not a useful test of basic English literacy skills.

**Can we test for ‘integration’?**

Questions remain as to whether it is possible to test for successful integration into Australia.

A recent [Productivity Commission report](#) framed integration as both economic integration and social inclusion. It is not just the skills and efforts of individual migrants that are key to promoting integration, but the societal attitudes, and government policies and programs that support settlement and removing barriers to integration.

The most important benefit of citizenship for migrants is the sense of inclusion and acceptance into their adopted community. Requirements for citizenship should therefore promote inclusion, not exclusion.

Discussions that focus on exclusion have the potential to alienate sectors of the community. They are a hindrance to people obtaining a sense of connection in Australia.

As Dutton observed, there are good reasons to encourage permanent residents to take up citizenship: for one, it enhances their integration in the community.

To the extent that poor English and poor understanding of Australian values is a barrier to this integration, the government needs to increase its efforts to educate prospective citizens – not look for ways to exclude them.