

Press Conference with the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, The Hon. Peter Dutton MP

20th April 2017 | [Comments](#) | [Transcripts](#)

SUBJECTS: Strengthening the Integrity of Australian Citizenship; 457 Visas.

E&OE...

PRIME MINISTER:

Good Morning. We are the most successful multicultural society in the world. We are an immigration nation. We've been built by millions of people who have come here from every corner of the world. We are as old as our First Australians, as young as the baby in the migrant mother's arms. We're as old as people, the oldest continuous human cultures of our first Australians, and as young as that new migrant. So we're a remarkable nation. Our multicultural society is an example to the world.

And at its foundation is Australian citizenship. There is no more important title in our democracy than "Australian Citizen", and Australian citizenship, the Australian citizen, that institution must reflect Australian values.

We are an extraordinary nation. You know, we're not defined by race or religion or culture, as many other nations are. We're defined by commitment to common values, political values, the rule of law, democracy, freedom, mutual respect, equality for men and women. These fundamental values are what make us Australian. So when you look in the mirror, when an Australian can look like a person from any race, any background in the world, but what we share are those values. And our citizenship process should reflect that. So today we are announcing changes to strengthen citizenship, to make for a stronger Australia, stronger citizenship, stronger citizens. The minister will go through the detail, but the headline points are these: You will need to be a permanent resident for four years. So that means a longer time in Australia as a permanent resident before you apply to be a citizen.

You will need to have competent English. That is a vital requirement, not a requirement at the moment, but we all know that the key to successful integration into the Australian community, to economic success and every success - social success - in becoming part of the community is being able to speak English.

So that is a very important change. And also, we need to ensure that our citizenship test enables applicants to demonstrate how they have integrated into and engaged with our Australian community, so that they're part of the community. They've lived here as a permanent resident for four years, they speak English, share our values, be integrated. Those are critically important elements. I believe that they will be empowering for applicants. This will be good for the applicants, good for the nation, underlining our Australian values at the very heart of Australian citizenship, Australian citizenship is the foundation of our democracy.

Now, I'll ask the Minister to go through these changes in further detail, every single one of which will enable us to be even stronger and even stronger and more successful multicultural society than we are today.

MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION:

Prime Minister, thanks very much. Ladies and gentlemen, I just wanted to go through a little bit of detail but I'm happy to answer questions from there. But you've seen this morning some of the detail that's been released. I want to emphasise the fact that this really is about asking people who come to our country seeking Australian citizenship not to abandon their heritage or their culture or their background, but to honour and respect that, as many migrant communities do right across the country right now.

I was in Wagga Wagga yesterday with the Yazidi community, amazing people, wonderful people. They have a story to tell like few others. It's a horrific story but they've called Australia home and the embrace of their children yesterday and the way in which they've adopted Australian values at the same time as they respect their heritage and culture is a great credit to them and to many migrants that have come before them. But when you decide to come to our country, you decide to abide by Australian laws.

You decide in your application, when you want to become an Australian citizen, that you will adopt Australian values. And we are very clear about saying that today in the announcement, because we are making no apologies for the fact that we do want people to be able to integrate. We want people to be able to send their kids to school, to take advantage of a great education system. We want people to be able to work if they're of working age and to make sure that if they have a capacity to work, they're contributing and not leading a life on welfare.

So there are many aspects to that but I'll just go through in a little bit more detail. So, as the Prime Minister pointed out, the residency requirement at the moment is effectively 12 months and that increases to four years.

The idea of that is for the demonstration of integration, of the ability to improve English language, to make sure that people can then demonstrate that they have been working, if they're of working age with a capacity to work, demonstrate that they haven't been perpetrators of domestic violence or whatever the case might be in relation to the particular test. So the first point is the residency requirement changes. There's a significant change in relation to the English language requirement which at the moment is basic. We increase that to IELTS Level 6 equivalent, so that is at a competent English language proficiency level and I think there would be wide support for that as well.

There is also the issue around Australian values and integration, which I alluded to a second ago. There will be further tests, further questions placed in the test as it currently operates, and there will be the opportunity for people to comment on some of these changes over the course of the next, over the course of the period between now and 1 June. So we will consult around the questions around the values issues and we can provide further detail. There is also change to be made to the pledge and, again, we'll consult on that particular issue as well. So I'll leave it there.

JOURNALIST:

How do you test someone's values? How do you judge someone's values in a test? Aren't you just testing whether they know some information or not? You can't really judge someone's values?

MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION:

At the moment, there's a multiple-choice test which is essentially a civics test, that asks questions of people. What we're saying is that we want people to demonstrate the fact that they have, if they're of working age, that they have worked over that period of four years, that they have sent their children to school. We would ask questions for example, as we're seeing in Melbourne at the moment, if kids are roaming the street at night as part of gangs in the apex gangs or elsewhere in cities like Melbourne, whether or not that is adopting an Australian value. Clearly it's not-

JOURNALIST:

But isn't that covered now, because you are legally required as a parent to send your children to school, you pledge to abide by Australian laws.

MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION:

No, it's not an issue that's properly tested now. There's no question about that. I think it's, I'll just answer this. I think there's a deficiency in the way in which it's applied now. So that's the principle. For example, domestic violence, a perpetrator of domestic violence. My view is that that person shouldn't become an Australian citizen. And we can ask that question but we can also undertake our own checks in relation to police checks or whatever the case might be. So that's how you can adopt, apply the test.

JOURNALIST:

So are you saying those checks don't happen now? Checks of criminal backgrounds?

MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION:

There are some checks undertaken at the moment but they're clearly insufficient.

JOURNALIST:

If we are Prime Minister, the most successful multicultural society in the world, as you so often say, you said this morning, why do we need this and need it now?

PRIME MINISTER:

What we're doing is strengthening the multicultural society and strengthening the commitment to Australian values. This is about strengthening the Australian values which are at the heart of citizenship, of being an Australian citizen. Australian citizenship should be honoured, cherished. It is a privilege. And when people apply to be Australian citizens they honour us, of course, because they're offering to join our Australian family, but equally it's important that they understand that they are making a commitment to our Australian values. And the points that Peter makes are absolutely correct.

In terms of demonstrating that they are integrated, that they have engaged with the Australian community, people who have lived here for four years, obviously, as permanent residents have had plenty of opportunity to do that. So I would like to see, as we - and we have a discussion paper out and so we're seeking views on this part of the process - but I would expect applicants to be able to say... Talk about their engagement with the community. Perhaps their involvement in a community organisation, with a school if they've got - if they're a parent that they're sending their kids to school, to demonstrate that they share the same views about the equality of men and women, respect for women and children.

These are very... These are fundamentally important Australian values and we shouldn't be... We shouldn't sort of back away as the Labor Party will no doubt do. The Labor Party will always rush off into the realm of their own political correctness. And they will, you know, they'll be complaining about this.

The fact is that it's these values. They are essentially political values, not party political values, but these political values are what bind us together. That's what keeps us together in the midst of our diversity. And our citizenship should reinforce that and celebrate that and honour it. That is what this is about. It's about commitment to Australia, Australian values, honouring them, prioritising them, because that is what makes us the extraordinary nation we are.

JOURNALIST:

These values aren't really enforceable outside of the law. If someone passes a test and says, "Tick, yes I don't beat my wife. Tick, I know who Don Bradman is. I'm an Australian citizen" And then they don't express Australian values, what happens?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, that is why it's important to, for the process to enable people to demonstrate that and a big part of that is engagement with the community, the fact that they're sending, say if they're a parent, they're sending their kids to school, their kids are going to school, the fact that they don't have a record of, you've mentioned family violence, if they don't have a record of family violence. This is going. This will put a greater onus on the applicant. You see there's been, look, I don't want to, I'm not a critic, the process we've had for applying to be an Australian citizen has been fairly consistent over a long period of time and it has been essentially an administrative process, right? And the test has been, as Peter said, the test is basically a civics test. I don't know if any of you have done it or looked at it but it's basically a civics test so see how you go on it as a political journalist. But the point is, what it doesn't go to or doesn't go to sufficiently are those questions of values and at the heart, at the very heart of our success is mutual respect; respect for each other, respect for people of different faiths and different cultures and respect of women and children. That is, you know as I've, you've often heard me say this. You know, not all disrespecting women, disrespecting women ends up in violence against women but that's where all violence against women begins. So this is a very important, very important Australian values; respect, mutual respect, respect for women and children and that is going to be, that is a key Australian value, who would argue with that? Is it reflected in our current process? No it's not, it should be-

JOURNALIST:

But Prime Minister I'm not clear why practices such as female genital mutilation, forcing children to marry and what have you, how they're being or could be included in values questions when they're already illegal under Australian law. What's the need for a values question when it's illegal under Australians law, Australian law?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well it's because it's important to reinforce our values. You see, are you proud of our Australian values? Are you a proud Australian? Well you should stand up for it. You should stand up for those values and that's what we're doing. You see, if we believe that respect for women and respect for women and children and saying no to violence against women and children, if we believe that that is an Australian value and it is and every one of you does believe that, then why should that not be made a key part, a fundamental part, a very prominent part, of our process to be an Australian citizen?

Why should the test simply be a checklist of civic questions, all very important, about the parliament and how many senators there are from each state. These are all important things to know, no doubt but fundamentally the values which bind us together are those ones of respect, the rule of law, commitment to freedom, democracy, these are the key elements in our Australian identity and our citizenship should reflect this. And I mean the proposition that, I've already heard people from the Labor Party criticising the proposition, that you should have competent English. Really? Are they serious? I mean does anybody doubt that if you want to succeed, if you want to even have a chance of succeeding in Australia, you need to be able to speak English? It is the single best thing any person coming to this country can do is learn English and that's why Peter's department put such a big effort into it. Well, that is going to be a requirement. You know what that will do? That will ensure that many people who had not learned English or had not been encouraged to learn English will do so. And so you know what we're doing? We're doing them a big favour.

JOURNALIST:

PM do you understand that the values are a contested area inside Australia, often by-

PRIME MINISTER:

The ones I've described are not-

JOURNALIST:

Could you then-

PRIME MINISTER:

Or shouldn't be.

JOURNALIST:

From a baseline, you've mentioned a few of them in passing-

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes

JOURNALIST:

Could you give a summary? You're talking about parliamentary democracy, the rule of secular law, you talked about equality of sexes. Could you give a summary of those things which you believe all Australians should sign up to?

PRIME MINISTER:

What we will, the answer is yes, but the discussion paper that Peter's department has released is going to engage public discussion on this, as indeed Phil Ruddock and Connie Fierravanti-Wells work did a little while ago and that's been a valuable part of that too, but I think it is a, I think we understand, you know, Australians have an enormous reservoir of good sense, and we know that our values of mutual respect, equality of men and women, democracy, freedom, rule of law, those values, a fair go, they are fundamental Australian values.

And what we need to ensure, they're not shared in every part of the world, that's true. But they're shared by us. And we are entitled to say if you want to be a citizen of Australia, there are a few things that we want you to demonstrate that you share; commitment to our values, allegiance to our country, competent English, being here for four years, integration, demonstrating that you have made that commitment, this is not just an administrative process of achieving some, you know, particular qualification, this is not about administration. This is about allegiance and commitment to Australian values.

JOURNALIST:

Prime Minister on the changes to the 457 visa scheme that's going to have stricter labour market testing. Are those standards going to be retrofitted to the Chinese free trade agreement or will they be made exempt from the new standards? And on the competency of English, what do you say to migrants who came here who couldn't speak English when they arrived and ended up being quite successful?

PRIME MINISTER:

I'll deal with the second one and Peter can deal with the labour market testing. Of course, a lot of migrants have come here without, in the past, without strong English skills. But of course they've acquired those English skills. You know, that's the whole point. So the, so the level of English under the new temporary skills visa is higher than it was, than it has been under 457s. We've increased that, it is vastly, that is a, you know, a vast improvement, a very important improvement. But to be a citizen of Australia, requiring people to have competent English is, you know, look, I think, you know what? I reckon if we went out today and said to Australians "Do you think you could become an Australian citizen without being able to speak English? They'd say "You're kidding". Surely you'd have to be able to speak, most people would be surprised that this has not been the law for years and it's fundamental. So I think this is a win-win, a win for Australia and actually a really big win for the applicants because it gives the incentive to acquire a skill that is vital to success. Peter?

MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION:

So just on the 457 labour market testing. So under Labor's 457 program, there were essentially there was no testing. Exemptions were existing and we abolished that obviously. We said yesterday that there would be mandatory testing both in relation to the short-term and the long-term stream but there will be adherence with our free trade agreements. So that's a statement of the obvious.

Now, I see some figures from Labor which try and conflate, you know, in the free trade agreement with the UK and others, to try and boost up their-

PRIME MINISTER:

But there is no free trade agreement.

MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION:

Well this is the point that seems to have escaped.

JOURNALIST:

[inaudible]

MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION:

So we adhere to the conditions of any free trade agreement or any Australian law, of course. But we have mandated the labour market testing which is a basic requirement. We want employers to find an Australian worker to put in that Australian job and if they can't after having demonstrated conditions then they can employ a foreign worker on a temporary basis.

JOURNALIST: If somebody insults their partner in private, why would you expect them to admit it in a citizenship test? And how do you stop people being coached to simply give the right answers?

PRIME MINISTER:

Peter and I can both answer that. Clearly there has to be a, obviously there will be a test and you're right, somebody could answer a test incorrectly or falsely. But if there have been, where there's been criminal activity, that is something that the, or reports of that or evidence of that, that is something that the department will have regard to. So this is a-

JOURNALIST:

What if somebody has been coached?

PRIME MINISTER:

If somebody has committed a crime, if there's been an AVO out against them, for example, if there's been evidence of domestic violence, then they can't deny that evidence exists so that would be-

JOURNALIST:

But if they don't tell friends, they're not going to tell the police, why are they going to tell you?

PRIME MINISTER:

What I am saying to you is if there's been evidence of criminal activity, if there's been an AVO for example or if there's been a prosecution, then that is something the Government will be aware of. Peter, do you want to elaborate on that?

MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION:

People will lie. I mean they lie now in relation to citizenship tests and in relationship to laws that exist now. That is not an argument for us to do nothing in this space. Domestic violence is a significant issue in this country. And we shouldn't tolerate one instance of it. And the fact that somebody might fudge an answer on a test or an application is no argument against us asking people if you want to become an Australian citizen, abide by our laws and our norms.

We don't accept violence against women and there is a lot of work that the Federal Government has done and the state governments have done and it's a bipartisan approach, to stamping out domestic violence and that work continues today and it will continue forever. Because human beings will be human beings. If we know that people are lying, there are consequences for that already under the Citizenship Act. So if somebody lies in an application, if they are fraudulent in their application for Australian citizenship, then there is an existing power under the Act in certain circumstances to revoke that citizenship.

JOURNALIST:

On the legislation, Prime Minister on the legislation, this is supposed to take affect from today, when do you anticipate these laws to change the Citizenship Act will come to the Parliament?

PRIME MINISTER:

We'll be briefing the Opposition and the crossbench about it today, Peter? Or as soon as possible.

MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION:

Subject to their availability.

PRIME MINISTER:

Subject to their availability. This is, we are, we look to the Opposition to support this legislation. This is defending, reinforcing Australian values. Now, we're all, what we've talked about this morning are values that we all agree with. No-one has suggested that they're wrong or mistaken. We all agree with them. We're standing up for Australian values and the Parliament should do so too.

JOURNALIST:

So if Labor doesn't sign up they don't respect Australian values? Is that what you're saying PM?

PRIME MINISTER:

What I'm saying is that we should, if we believe in our nation's values and we do, then why should we not require citizens to make a commitment to those values? It's a question of whether you really believe, in the values that have made Australia the remarkable nation that it is. Now, we do. We believe Australians do. We believe the community does, so this is a time, this is an opportunity to stand up for Australian values, to put them at the very heart of the most important position in our democracy, the most important title: "Australian citizen." Thanks very much.

[ends]