

Australia's Citizenship Bill Fails

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Featured image: Immigration Minister Peter Dutton

This is a government that takes pride in its hard headedness and faux populism. Knowing it would have to brave a sceptical, even baffled Senate, Australian Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, resembling a bit dictator struggling for traction, decided to ignore the signals.

What was required, claimed Dutton, were tougher citizenship laws to govern Australia, an ironic state of affairs given the number of Australian parliamentarians facing the High court over their eligibility to sit in the chambers of Canberra.

The proposed legislation, titled the *Australian Citizenship Legislative Amendment (Strengthening the Requirements for Australian Citizenship and Other Measures) Bill*, would give a good serving against large swathes of the immigrant community.

It would have required the applicant for Australian citizenship to pass a stand-alone English test involving reading, writing, listening and speaking and show a minimum permanent residency requirement of four years.

Not feeling those measures to be suitably onerous, Dutton insisted on slipping a few other measures into the package: a limit, for instance, to the number of times the language test could be taken (three); and steps demonstrated by the applicant to show forms of integration into the Australian community. (The fumes of charred meat on an Australian sausage sizzle come to mind.)

The reasons for these changes, outlined in the government's shoddy paper *Strengthening the Test for Australian Citizenship* (April 2017), reads like a stream of propaganda consciousness.[1] Platitudes spring up from the pages like fretful children: the idea of Australia being the country of "a 'fair go' for all"; "the most successful multicultural society in the world"; "shared values".

Then comes the cutting and suspicious undertone, the irresistible resort to a security rationale that casts any doubt aside. This is a government that can't trust prospective citizens. Nor will it. The weeds shall be found, the pretenders rooted out.

"The Australian Government places the highest priority on the safety and security of all Australians." Global terrorist concerns had "caused concern in the Australian community."

This point has always had one glaring weakness: terrorist attacks across European capitals tend to take place from European-born citizens rather than applicants. The point is

conveniently missed for matters of rhetorical effect, dividing Australian residents into the anointed and the discarded.

Opponents to the changes, among them the Nick Xenophon Team, Labor, and the Greens, did give Dutton some breathing space: a Wednesday night deadline to reach some accord and soften the hammering blow. Desperate to keep matters harsh, Dutton's fig leaf was a poorly eviscerated one: delay the citizenship changes to commence on July 2018, as opposed to making it retrospective, and reduce the level of English expected from "competent" to "modest".

The response from NXT senator Stirling Griff made it clear that these were far from sufficient.

"Just amending the English language test and retrospectivity is not sufficient. We will still be rejecting the bill." [2]

The bill was effectively struck off the notice paper by the time Wednesday's proceedings had concluded. No vote had taken place.

The champagne corks were duly popped. Tasmanian Greens Senator Nick McKim called it "a huge victory for multicultural Australia", whatever that problematic concept entails. [3] Labor's Shadow Attorney General Mark Dreyfus filled the chorus with his own propaganda laced glee.

"The death of Dutton's citizenship bill is a victory for Australia and all new arrivals who wish to become part of our great country." [4]

Media stories were duly run to fluff the victory. Pakistan-born software developer Bushra Zainuddin featured in the ABC wishing "to be part of an Australian family." (Her husband and child are both Australian citizens.) Her timing in terms of applying for citizenship was immaculately bad: April 20, when the Turnbull government announced its efforts to revise the citizenship rules.

"I'd just delivered a baby. He's Australian. We thought we'd become a whole family of Australians." [5]

The killing off this bill doesn't entail its vanishing. The corpse has yet to be cremated and buried. Dutton is the sort of individual who believes in authoritarian resurrections. Only he can defend Australia against its aliens, local and foreign. Most Australians, claimed the irritated minister, "would be shaking their heads" at the stance taken in the Senate.

Nor can Labor necessarily be taken at face value for such remarks as that made by its citizenship spokesman, Tony Burke, who did describe the failure of the bill as "a great victory for every person who wants to pledge allegiance to this country and make a commitment to Australia." [6]

Burke had suggested that the bill was so extreme as to require a significant historical comparison. Not since the White Australia policy, the first legislative act of Australia's infant parliament in 1901, had politicians seen this. They are bound to see more.

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Notes

- [1] <https://www.border.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/discussion-papers/citizenship-paper.pdf>
- [2] <http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/peter-duttons-citizenship-crackdown-quietly-killed-off-by-the-senate-20171018-gz38zv.html>
- [3] <https://twitter.com/NickMcKim/status/920532671482048513>
- [4] <https://twitter.com/markdreyfusQCMP/status/920737119349256194>
- [5] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-19/dutton-citizenship-changes-blocked-immigrant-family/9064600>
- [6] <http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/peter-duttons-citizenship-crackdown-quietly-killed-off-by-the-senate-20171018-gz38zv.html>

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