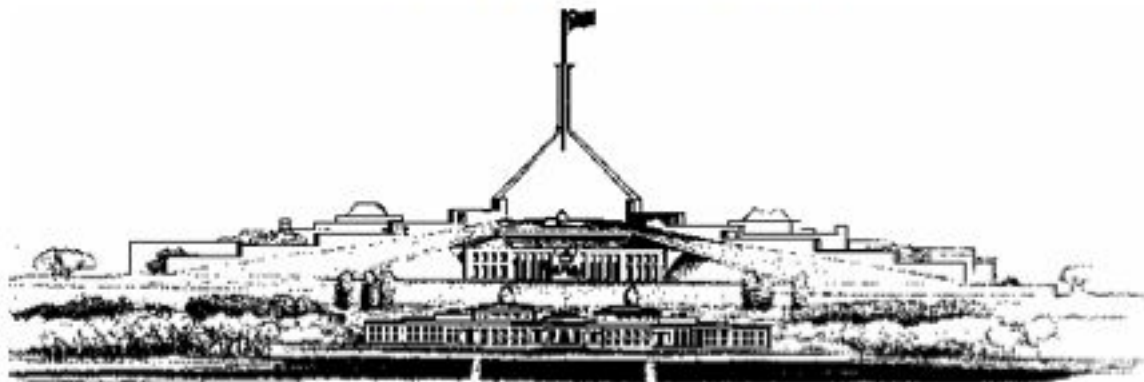




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

BILLS

**Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment
(Strengthening the Requirements for Australian
Citizenship and Other Measures) Bill 2017**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 9 August 2017

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker O'Brien, Ted, MP

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Question No.

Mr TED O'BRIEN (Fairfax) (10:24): Well, the member for Watson has certainly put on some theatre, full of symbolism and absolutely lacking substance. Clearly the member himself must not have spent any time in a foreign market, struggling to catch a bus or a train, look up a timetable or find a doctor. I have. I've spent years doing just that in non-English-speaking countries where there is not one English sign.

The English proficiency requirements outlaid in the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment (Strengthening the Requirements for Australian Citizenship and Other Measures) Bill 2017 have two streams: a study stream and a general stream. So, when the Leader of the Opposition and the member for Watson carry on about there being a need for university-level proficiency, that is a dishonesty. It is wrong. And the very people that they purport to represent are the ones in whose hearts they are driving fear.

We are an open political economy in Australia. We welcome people to this country, and what we do not need is the Labor Party misrepresenting responsible legislation, driving fear into those people who we should be welcoming here to Australia. It is their words to suggest university-level proficiency. There is no such thing required, which makes one wonder about the increasing importance of Australians deciding whether the blind negativity, the opposition for opposition's sake that comes from Labor on virtually every government bill, is simply wilful, destructive obstructionism or whether it comes from an entrenched hypocrisy that has become the hallmark of today's Labor Party. Australians should consider and make a decision on that question as they listen to the member for Watson and Labor debate bills in this parliament in the lead-up to the next election, because, if they do, they will perceive the extent to which the Australian Labor Party is not only bereft of solutions but, more importantly, totally unworthy of their support. The Australian Labor Party, once a great and worthy part of our polity, has shown repeatedly that its aim is to make this country ungovernable, because it perceives in that behaviour the creation of a disenchantment that will grease its way back into office. This is a despicable approach to governance in this country and is on display yet again in Labor's response to the bill we're debating today to strengthen the Australian citizenship legislation by amending it.

All elements of this bill have broad support outside the soft left that now dominates Labor and the hard left which has otherwise deserted the Labor Party for the Greens and which Labor now desperately wants to claw back by relentlessly sliding further and further to the left. This bill establishes a considerable yet totally reasonable English language test for would-be Australian citizens, a test closely in line with similar tests in countries like the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand, using precisely the same template, the International English Language Testing System. In all the criticisms from the member for Watson, he was not able to suggest any other template. There was no proposal—just blind criticism.

The bill extends the amount of time new arrivals must legally reside in this country before they can apply for citizenship from one year to four. It requires applicants to sign an Australian values statement. It requires that applicants demonstrate an ability to integrate into the Australian community, including by behaving in a manner consistent with Australian values, reflected in the Australian values statement. It requires applicants to pledge their allegiance to Australia, their fellow Australians, and Australian values, and allows the minister to determine eligibility criteria for sitting the citizenship test, which may consider the fact that a person has previously failed the test or did not comply with one or more of the rules related to the test, or if he or she cheated. It also enables the minister, in certain circumstances, to overrule decisions made by the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, an extension of his authority made necessary by the fact that the tribunal has determined people to be of good character even after they have been convicted of child sexual offences, manslaughter, people smuggling and domestic violence—extraordinary, extraordinary decisions!

Labor opposes all of these steps, despite the fact that submissions to the 2015 inquiry into the citizenship test undertaken by this government showed strong community support for this sort of response. Why, therefore, is Labor once again just opposing, opposing, opposing? It is increasingly obvious that the answer is: because of the almost total capitulation of the Australian Labor Party to the socialist left. For example, when the proposal

for a more realistic language test was introduced and a longer period before an immigrant could seek Australian citizenship was proposed, back in April, the opposition leader actually supported the thrust of it. He said this:

I think it is reasonable to look for English language proficiency, and I think that it's reasonable to have some period of time ... before you become an Australian citizen.

That was just in April. Now he has backflipped—backflipped because he has outraged the socialist left of his own party and they have brought him very meekly back into line.

The member for Watson, from whom we just heard, a former minister for immigration and border protection, no less, and a card-carrying leftie, too, of course, has said in the past: 'We need stricter English language requirements.' That was the member for Watson in 2006. In the same year, which was when the Howard government was considering toughening up some of the citizenship requirements, he said that nobody who was not prepared to sign a declaration to respect our laws and our way of life should be allowed into the country. John Howard at the time promoted the importance of English for new immigrants, and the member for Watson acknowledged that John Howard was 'spot on'—spot-on in 2006, but not today, apparently. It seems that these leopards of Watson and Maribyrnong have changed their spots, yet again, because that is what has been ordered by the ringmasters of Labor's caucus circus, the socialist left, and so to the left they creep.

As Troy Bramston, the former Labor insider and now, often, commentator on the ALP, recently observed, the left is now running the Labor Party, both organisationally and in this parliament, because Labor members are at the beck and call of the organisation and the left now dominates. So the measures that the members for Maribyrnong and Watson so strongly supported just a few years ago are now, to use their word, 'snobbery,' because that's the word they've been instructed to use.

The Labor Party's failure to comprehend or honestly represent the way the English test works is irresponsible. Let me explain it to them, yet again, in simple terms. There are two distinctly separate strains of the testing system. That shouldn't be hard to comprehend. There is a separate testing system for those applicants who wish to study here in Australia, and then another, separate strain for the wider immigration program. So there is one for an academic stream and one for general applicants. The levels of proficiency required under these two streams are different and fit for purpose. There are degrees of capability, registered by the testing authorities on a scale of 1 to 9. The proposed English test does indeed require proficiency to level 6 for both tests, but they are different sets of tests themselves. In other words, the general stream test is far less onerous. This is where the Labor Party is being irresponsible and creating fear among the very people who are trying to master the English language enough to pass level 6—not level 9, level 6. Labor simply says that because we want would-be citizens to achieve level 6 we are measuring them against university-level regimes. That's not what is being proposed. That is why we have that second general stream.

The second stream does require at least a basic understanding of the language. A person should have an ability to understand it when they are spoken to; an ability to be orally responsive to other people in a way that is understandable to the listener, and if there are some errors or mispronunciations, et cetera, that may make understanding them a bit difficult; and an ability to write it at a basic level. There is no problem with people struggling with a language, including English, but it's in their vested interest for them to integrate, for their families to be part of our society and for them to have a degree of proficiency that allows that to happen. An ability to read, for example, encompasses such things as reading a train or bus timetable to be able to get around, or reading a tabloid newspaper or popular magazine to help develop an understanding of how Australians tick. It is nothing outrageous or unreasonable. What is required is simply and sensibly a clear indication at a person has enough proficiency in the language to get by in a society where the principle language used both as a spoken and written form of communication is in fact—wait for it—English.

Another equally spurious, equally hypocritical position being adopted by the Labor Party in relation to this bill is a demand for a longer period of residency before citizenship. They wish to make that shorter. Again, you just have to consider what the members for Maribyrnong and Watson—the member for Watson especially, as the principle Labor spokesperson in this area—have said in the past. Once again, there are blatant contradictions. Perhaps they used to think for themselves before surrendering to the tight leash from the left. Have these multiple backflips meant the Labor Party has genuinely lost its way and it wishes to totally rebrand as a pinko socialist left party?

To the members for Watson and Maribyrnong, to the future members who are going to be standing in this House and to the Labor speakers who will speak after me, I ask a few questions. If they do not wish for new Australian

citizens to speak proficient English, what language do they wish for them to speak? If the Labor Party does not want new citizens to sign up to Australian values, what other country's values do they wish new citizens to sign up to? If the Labor Party does not want new citizens to pledge allegiance to the nation of Australia, then what nation do they wish allegiance to be pledged to?

Australia is bound by a common set of values and we need to ensure that those values are upheld and respected, just as we must ensure the rule of law. What is being proposed in this bill strengthens the citizenship test for Australia and, therefore, strengthens the very values that bind us as a nation. If the Labor Party wishes to keep sliding to the left and reject it, then it only serves to weaken the country and the very people they purport to represent.