**SUBMISSION FROM:**

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My comments apply to all the likely impact of the proposed changes on all migrants including people who have been granted refugee status. I am also a member of the Refugee Advocacy Network which is an informal network of groups and individual who are concerned about the treatment of refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia.

**KEY CONCERNS ABOUT THE PROPOSED LEGISLATION**

1. **Impact in wider community on perceptions about migrants :** The introduction of this proposal sends a signal to the wider community that migrants seeking citizenship need to be discouraged by extending the waiting time, and making the citizenship tests more rigorous. This constitutes a symbolic ‘narrowing of the door’ implying that there is a problem per se with migrants.

Given the success of the Australian migration program over many generations – in terms of both social and economic benefits – it is concerning that the suggested changes have been proposed, casting some doubt on the overall benefit of our migration program.

We know that here is a level of disquiet in the community about people who are perceived as different from ‘us’, but successive waves of migrants have become well integrated into the community within one or two generations. A foundational ‘value’ underpinning our multicultural society is valuing and respecting the diverse communities which constitute modern Australia.

It is ironic that Government is proposing these legislative changes which would significantly undermine this key value, while suggesting that the proposed changes would somehow strengthening Australian values – there is clearly a contraction here.

1. **Higher levels of English language proficiency requirements :** The proposed tightening of the English language test sends a clear signal that the government would like to make it harder for some migrants to become citizens. This is clearly discriminatory, and echoes the White Australia policy which we discarded many decades ago. It is very disturbing to see this proposal.

While it is reasonable to expect a level of English language proficiency, the current level of testing has proven adequate, and most people over time acquire everyday English language. It is my understanding that the proposed level of English required is a significantly higher level, which would rule out many applicants. It is ironic that many Australian citizens would struggle to pass the test at this level.

Rather than tightening the English test, it would be of much greater benefit to our community to ensure that migrants and applicants for citizenship have better access to English classes - I understand there has been a reduction in access for some people – especially where people come from places where English has not been taught, and for those who may have had limited or interrupted access to education. This of course applies to some people who arrive as refugees or people seeking protection.

In my experience, people migrating to Australia, under whatever circumstances, do so with the intent of building their lives here, and participating in our community.

In addition to provision of English classes, we need to be much more proactive and creative about ‘bridge building’ activities within local communities to welcome and embrace newly-arrived people, and especially those from non-English speaking countries. A stronger emphasis on these activities would result in more rapid social integration, and improved language skills would naturally flow from these activities. There would be mutual benefit from these ‘community building’ activities, with better cross cultural understanding and celebration of diversity within our Australian community. In this way we can build s strong, inclusive and cohesive community.

There are a number of rural communities where people have embraced new comers from refugee backgrounds, and demonstrated the whole of community benefits of extending an active and sincere welcome to people from different backgrounds. These examples shine a light on the way forward in terms of strengthening our multicultural community. It is because we often lack these community building activities, that we see the problems associated with the ‘fear of the other’ xenophobia and alienation emerging. We will not find the answer in ‘closing the door’.

1. **Extension of waiting period:** If adopted, the proposed changes would substantially prolong the period of uncertainty for migrants who wish to become Australian citizens. The current arrangements have served us well, and there does not appear to be any practical reason for extending the period of waiting.

Extending waiting periods is clearly intended as a disincentive/deterrent. It leaves people in an extended state of uncertainty, especially as it combines with tighter tests for citizenship. There is no value to our community in doing this, and we know that extended periods of uncertainty are detrimental to mental health and well-being.

Extended waiting periods would impact event more harshly on many people from refugee backgrounds, who may have already spent years in precarious situations, including being separated from loved ones. To place considerably longer waiting periods on these people would only add to the trauma they have experienced, unnecessarily extending the period of separate from family.

1. **Ministerial powers:** It is very concerning to see that the proposed legislation would grant the Minister even more discretion on citizenship matters. It is preferable that matters concerning citizenship are dealt with fairly and in a transparent way. It is concerning that the preference and bias of an individual Minister might be the deciding factor in whether are person gains or retains citizenship. I am very concerned that the proposal is to extend these discretionary powers. On the matter of citizenship and other civil rights, it is important that there are institutions and processes which are consistent, fair and clearly understood. To extend the possibility of political intervention/interference with these processes is very undesirable.