

Howard government unveils new “Australian values” citizenship test

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Australian Prime Minister John Howard last month chose the anniversary of the December 2005 race riot at Sydney’s Cronulla beach to outline further details of the citizenship test initially proposed last September. The choice of date was itself indicative of the underlying thrust of the new test, and the entire campaign to restore what Howard’s government calls “Australian values”.

The anti-Muslim rampage at Cronulla was whipped up by talk-back radio hosts and other mass media, the Howard government and other promoters of Australian nationalism as part of a campaign aimed at creating the political climate for escalating military aggression in the Middle East, accompanied by attacks on basic democratic rights at home. Its purpose is to divide the working class along ethnic and religious lines, and divert escalating social tensions caused by the growing chasm between a wealthy elite and the vast majority of ordinary people into communal conflicts.

Howard announced that migrants would have to answer 30 multiple-choice questions on Australian society and history from a collection of 200, with all questions and responses exclusively in English. In addition, they will have to pass a yet-to-be specified test to demonstrate a “working knowledge” of the English language. Citizenship will be allowed only after four years of permanent residency, twice the previous requirement. These measures will discriminate against immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds, and against those who are working class and poor, less able to afford the thousands of dollars needed to take intensive English language classes.

All citizenship applicants will also be compelled to sign a formal statement declaring their allegiance to what Andrew Robb, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, describes as “the Australian way of life and our shared values.” Even those applying for a visa stay of more than 12 months, except New Zealanders, will first have to “indicate their understanding and respect of Australian values”.

Muslims and those of Middle Eastern descent are the immediate focus of this attack. In February last year, Howard said Muslim immigrants posed a unique social threat, citing a supposed “fragment which is utterly antagonistic to [Australian] society.” He claimed that “raving on about jihad” made Muslims particularly dangerous, insinuating that they were likely to be terrorists. Treasurer Peter Costello later declared that Muslims should accept “Australian values or leave.” The clear implication was that those who refused to pledge their allegiance to officially-

defined “values” should be stripped of citizenship and deported.

More broadly, the proposed legislation will provide a means for denying citizenship—and hence fundamental democratic rights, such as the right to vote, stand for election and travel to and from Australia—to anyone regarded as politically dangerous or insufficiently patriotic. According to National Party Senator Barnaby Joyce, a member of Howard’s ruling Coalition, the new test will block those “who have militant ideas who want to destroy our nation”.

Already, visa and citizenship applicants can be rejected, on the advice of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) as “security risks”. Now, adherence to a set of political “values” will become the basis upon which citizenship is granted or denied. As a September 17 government discussion paper stated, the test will become “a mechanism” to ensure that citizens understand “common values”, which will promote “social cohesion.” This is the real meaning of the government’s repeated claim that “Australian citizenship is a privilege, not a right.” Privileges can, after all, be taken away.

Howard’s timing—his announcement also came within a week of the election of a new Labor Party leader, Kevin Rudd—foreshadows a “khaki” election campaign this year centred on militarism and jingoism. But the implications of the “Australian values” crusade, which Labor entirely supports, go far beyond immediate electoral calculations. It is no coincidence that new citizens will be required to pledge their willingness to “defend Australia should the need arise”, i.e., participate in military operations.

Governments around the world are ratcheting up national “values” as a means of preparing their populations for war, amid the eruption of US militarism in the Middle East and escalating major power conflicts over energy resources, trade and markets. A day after Howard unveiled the new test, British Prime Minister Tony Blair declared that Muslims had a “duty to integrate” into British society and accept “common unifying British values”. US authorities have also recently announced a tougher citizenship examination, designed to test understanding of “US values”. Governments in Japan, the Netherlands and New Zealand are running similarly nationalist “values” and language campaigns.

According to last September’s discussion paper, “Australian values” are: “respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual,” “our support for democracy”, “our commitment to the rule of law”, “the equality of men and women,” “the spirit of a fair

go,” and “mutual respect and compassion for those in need”.

The list is deeply hypocritical. Regarding “democracy” and “the rule of law,” the Howard government has been the most vociferous supporter of the Bush administration’s illegal wars of aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq, its installation of puppet regimes and the destruction of basic democratic rights at home under the banner of the “war on terror”.

In its own Pacific “patch”, the Howard government has dispatched troops, police and officials to enforce undemocratic “regime change” in East Timor, take control of key levers of power and create political provocations in the Solomon Islands, shore up an unelected monarchy in Tonga, undermine the government in Vanuatu and meddle in the internal affairs of Papua New Guinea and Fiji.

For more than five years, Australian citizen David Hicks has been stripped of all “freedom” and “dignity,” along with the right to a fair trial, in his incarceration and torture at the US military detention camp at Guantánamo Bay, and Australian personnel have been involved in similar illegal practices at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As for a “fair go” and “mutual respect and compassion,” refugees seeking asylum in Australia have been turned away by warships or transported for indefinite detention on remote islands. At the same time, social inequality has reached unprecedented levels. The richest 200 people now have a combined wealth of \$100 billion, while one fifth of all households, or 3.6 million people, attempt to live on less than \$400 a week.

Howard’s new measures bear a striking resemblance to the notorious dictation test used to enforce the racist “White Australia” policy at the turn of the twentieth century. The federation of the Australian nation in 1901 was founded on this policy, aimed at promoting Anglo-European supremacism and dividing Australian workers from their fellow toilers across Asia.

Under the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, the test became the means for imprisoning and deporting any new arrival who could not accurately write down 50 words dictated by an immigration officer in any European language selected by the officer. Migrants who were nationally or racially “undesirable” were expelled on the official grounds of insufficient language skills.

At present, a “basic knowledge” of English is required for citizenship, with the test consisting of a simple oral conversation with an immigration official. Now, according to Howard, applicants must have a “working capacity” in “the national language, which is English.” The new requirement will be used to weed out immigrants from non-English speaking parts of the globe, notably Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and most of Africa.

In reality, English is only the *de facto* national language of Australia. It does not have *de jure* status, as acknowledged by the immigration department’s own website. The elevation of English into the “national language” is designed to separate English-speaking “citizens” from “alien” immigrants and foster a xenophobic climate.

Howard’s claim that after four years of Australian residency “it’s not unreasonable” to expect migrants to develop a “facility in

the English language” lacks any foundation. The website of the Centre for Adult English Language Acquisition states that five years is generally acknowledged as the minimum time required for a person with no previous English to achieve most communication tasks. It takes 500-1,000 hours of instruction for an adult who is literate in another language, but has no prior English instruction, “to reach a level where she can satisfy her basic needs, survive on the job, and have limited social interaction in English”.

For many years, immigrants received free English language classes but today the government provides only limited help through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). AMEP offers 510 hours of tuition to most adult migrants for an annual fee of \$315. Refugee and humanitarian entrants are eligible for 610 hours, or 910 hours if they are under the age of 25. Beyond that, private providers charge hefty fees—for example, the Sydney College of English offers a part-time, 15-hour per week intensive English course for \$250 per week.

Howard faces no real opposition within the parliamentary and media establishment. In fact, the Labor Party, which together with the trade unions was the architect of the “White Australia” policy, has played a leading role in the “Australian values” campaign. Last year, former Labor leader Kim Beazley demanded that all entrants into Australia, including tourists, sign an oath of loyalty as part of the “struggle against extremists and terrorists”.

While his successor Rudd has shelved this proposal, Labor fully supports the new citizenship test. Its shadow minister for immigration, integration and citizenship, Tony Burke, declared last week that the “Australian community” knew how important “speaking English is to successful integration”.

Australian Greens Senator Kerry Nettle opposed the citizenship measures, but only on the nationalist basis that Howard had “failed to justify [their] need, or show how they will make Australians better off”. She called on Labor to join the Greens in voting against the legislation. Her comments only serve to promote illusions in Labor and to obscure the real motivations behind the “values” campaign.

Working people should oppose all forms of discrimination and chauvinism. As a matter of fundamental principle, all people, no matter what their country of birth, ethnic background or financial position, should have the right to live and work wherever they choose, with full political and democratic rights. That is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



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