Australian government demands “patriotic” citizenship tests

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Applicants for citizenship must be “Australian patriots,” Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared this week. He issued this edict, with its distinctly militarist overtones, in outlining reactionary new legislation to hand the government far-reaching powers to bar access to the fundamental democratic right of citizenship.

The Liberal-National Coalition, with the Labor opposition’s in-principle support, has seized upon the latest alleged terrorist attacks in Manchester, London and Melbourne—each committed by individuals well known to the authorities—to justify measures to deny citizenship on a range of discriminatory grounds.

Facing widespread social discontent and an intensifying political crisis, the fragile government is whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment to divide the working class. It is also introducing more so-called terrorism laws to strengthen the powers of the police-intelligence apparatus, while escalating its involvement in the US-led war for dominance over the Middle East.

Delivering a National Security Statement to parliament on Tuesday, Turnbull stated: “We should make no apology for asking those who seek to join our Australian family to join us as Australian patriots—committed to the values that define us, committed to the values that unite us.”

The proposed citizenship powers show that the “values” being pushed focus on support for US militarism, promotion of nationalism, discrimination against targeted groups, such as Muslims and Chinese, and exclusion of poor and working-class immigrants.

Under the legislation, tabled today, citizenship applicants must prove they have been a permanent resident in Australia for at least four years, instead of one. They must also undertake a university-level, English-language speaking, writing and reading test that will be extremely difficult for many working-class people to pass, especially those from a non-English speaking background or who have limited formal education.

In addition, applicants must formally “pledge allegiance” to Australia and pass a yet-to-be-detailed “values test” to demonstrate they uphold “community standards and laws” and have “integrated” into Australian society. The immigration minister will hold discretionary powers to set the “integration” test and the “Australian Values Statement” that applicants must sign.

According to Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton, applicants will have to prove that, over four years, they have been employed, and not received welfare payments, have “engaged” with local organisations, and their children have not been in trouble with the police.

The minister will have new powers to arbitrarily reject applications if a person has been assessed as “a risk to security” or the minister “is no longer satisfied that the applicant has displayed behaviour consistent with Australian values.” These provisions allow for rejection, and potential deportation, for opposing war, austerity or virtually any other government policy.

Those who fail the citizenship test on three occasions will face a two-year ban before they can make another application.

A “good character” test will also be extended from adults to include children under the age of 18 if they have been accused of criminal activities, even if their parents pass the tougher test.

Dutton seized on a hysterical media campaign against immigrant youth allegedly involved in gangs in Melbourne to provide a pretext for this provision, claiming that “15, 16, 17-year-olds are involved in

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adult-like criminal behaviour."

In an ABC radio interview on Tuesday, Dutton indicated that parents of supposed youth gang members could also be denied citizenship. He said applicants would have to say "whether their kids have been involved in that gang violence."

The legislation features further arbitrary ministerial powers, including to overturn citizenship decisions made by the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. This measure was originally proposed in a 2014 bill, which later stalled in the Senate.

There will be new powers to revoke citizenships if the minister considers the citizenship was obtained by "fraud or misrepresentation," including "concealment of material circumstances" or the citizen committed certain offences.

The English-language test recalls the "dictation test" that was used in the first six decades of the 20th century to enforce the "White Australia" policy, while barring entry to officially unwanted working-class people and those with left-wing political views. Applied selectively to Chinese and other non-European immigrants—but not to wealthy business people—the test was often conducted in obscure European languages to make it impossible to pass.

In his radio interview, Dutton dismissed calls for the government to provide English-language courses to assist applicants pass the test. He said people would "need to help themselves and use online learning abilities, workplace abilities to improve English language, etc."

Tabling the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment (Strengthening the Requirements for Australian Citizenship and Other Measures) Bill today, Dutton asserted that "Australian citizenship is an extraordinary privilege."

Rather than a "privilege," citizenship is an essential democratic right, without which members of society are stripped of all political and civil rights, including to vote, stand for office and obtain health, education, welfare and other social services.

These measures escalate an attack on these fundamental civil and political rights. In 2015, the government pushed through legislation, with the Labor Party's backing, enabling it to revoke the citizenship of dual nationals by decree.

In his national security statement, Turnbull directly linked the citizenship changes to the expansion of the "war on terror." He claimed that the Australian Defence Force was helping to "liberate" people in Iraq and Syria from ISIS and boasted that Australia's state and territory leaders had agreed to further "bipartisan" terrorism legislation, on top of "eight tranches" already introduced by the government.

Having actively participated in Washington's predatory wars across the Middle East, killing thousands of people, devastating entire societies and sending millions fleeing, both the Coalition and Labor are intensifying this drive.

They are seeking to divert growing social discontent over unemployment and underemployment, the rising cost of living and cuts to education, healthcare and other social services, into militarist and xenophobic channels.

At the same time, the measures are aimed at staving off a deepening crisis of the Coalition government, which faces frustrated demands from big business for more severe austerity measures, as well as internal rifts and renewed speculation of a move against Turnbull's leadership.

Fearing popular opposition, Labor would not promise to pass the latest bill until it saw the details, but indicated underlying support. Citizenship spokesman Tony Burke said the party would "deal responsibly with any sensible proposal." Labor has backed, or initiated, every major attack on citizenship and other legal and democratic rights since the fraudulent "war on terror" was proclaimed in 2001.

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