Are We Really Living Safe Together? - Part 1

Report of Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria’s Roundtable Discussion on changes to citizenship laws held on 19 June 2015

The Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria (ECCV) is the peak advocacy organisation for ethnic and multicultural groups in Victoria. Our policy briefs provide succinct information about key findings from our consultations which range from direct community submissions as well as our own roundtable discussions and forums. This roundtable multicultural community consultation was part one of a two part series of ECCV consultations called: Are We Really Living Safe Together?

At the Federal level, on 26 May 2015, the Prime Minister, the Hon Tony Abbott MP, announced new measures to strengthen Australian citizenship, including a National Consultation on Australian Citizenship. The aim of this roundtable discussion was to offer stakeholders in the ethnic and multicultural community sector the chance to have a voice in ECCV’s submission to this national consultation and to encourage their own submissions.

At the Victorian level, ECCV received community letters, stakeholder visits, phone calls and emails expressing community concern about the public debate and the expressed intention of the Australian Government to revoke citizenship that would target those with dual citizenship.

Participants that attended the consultation included representatives from ethnic and multi-faith community organisations including multicultural community service providers, multicultural broadcasting, peak bodies with an interest in multicultural affairs, former academics and CEOs.
**KEY POINTS**

Several key points arose from the consultation including the ‘rule of law’ and how much power could be placed in the hand of one minister. Many participants commented that the Australian Government should uphold the important principle that citizenship should not be denied and that people who commit crimes should be convicted under the law.

People opposed violent extremism but questioned who determines what terrorism is. There was deep concern about the tone and language of the terms of reference of Government consultation on this issue.

A discussion paper, *Australian Citizenship – Your Right, Your Responsibility*, has been developed to encourage a national conversation about these important issues. The discussion paper is available on the Australian citizenship website [www.citizenship.gov.au](http://www.citizenship.gov.au). As part of the consultation process, the Australian Government invites written input in two ways:

1. Complete the online form using this link: [https://dibpau.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_2oBvNXepUW2jF77](https://dibpau.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_2oBvNXepUW2jF77); and
2. Make submissions and comments via email to: CitizenshipPaper2015@immig.gov.au; or mail: Citizenship Policy, Department of Immigration and Border Protection, PO Box 25, Belconnen, ACT 2616, Australia.

Written input can be provided by **30 June 2015**.

**INTERIM FINDINGS:**

The following is a snapshot of issues raised by roundtable participants.

- ECCV’s submission to the Australian Government citizenship consultation should focus on the rule of law and how much power could be placed in the hand of one minister.
- Australia should have: “one law and one citizenship, and no punishment without conviction by law.”
- Citizenship is valued by people from migrant and refugee backgrounds as they believe it is the cornerstone of our democracy. It encourages inclusiveness, provides culturally diverse people born overseas with security, equality and a deeper commitment to the values of the nation, and is a celebration for culturally diverse people born overseas.
- The more important issue is about civil engagement and to reinvigorate that terminology instead of talking about revoking citizens’ rights in democratic Australia.
- The proposed changes to citizenship legislation assume that a Minister of its government should be able to act as a disinterested, impartial, informed judge in such matters. This seriously challenges the essence of Magna Carta of which we have been historically proud.
- ‘Terrorism’ is a colourful term used in the debate but not defined. It says nothing about the process of the development of laws and penalties that might be established for crimes that may be defined as ‘terrorism’.
- The language of the proposals to revoke citizenship suggests that the current Australian Government has an assimilationist – not multicultural – view of Australian society.
- Some felt that it is difficult to prove that Australian citizenship is currently valued because there is no framework for ‘valued’ however, others felt that Australian citizenship is highly valued by migrants and refugees and they demonstrate this by:
  - Huge uptake of citizenship when offered.
  - Demonstrating commitment by renouncing previous citizenship.
  - Perceptions of Australia as a ‘golden land’ attract migrants.
  - Australia Day celebration participation shows how much migrants and refugees value citizenship.
- Participation in employment, small business and public/civic life.
- People feel that questioning the eligibility requirements of citizenship with longer periods of permanent residency before applying for citizenship is unfair.
- The eligibility criteria for citizenship should be reasonable and achievable.
- A 2-year waiting period is recommended but no more than 4 years.
- Citizenship should enable people to feel commitment to society; the longer you delay the process the less inclusiveness there is in society.
- People believe that citizenship gives privileges.
- Migrants don’t just walk in the door to be accepted... They need to go through a lot before that... They treat citizenship as a goal.
- People felt it is important to make the point that people from culturally diverse backgrounds from overseas make the commitments and pledge when they take up citizenship.
- The proposed changes suggest that if someone has dual citizenship it can be revoked but from those with solo citizenship – participants felt that is not ethntical. It is not ethical to distinguish dual and non-dual citizenship; and citizenship should be seen as one entity; not dual and non-dual.
- People felt there should be no revoking of citizenship as a punishment.
- There should be one class of citizenship; past examples of such practice were flawed and people could be deported.
- Participants offered general comments about the ethics and principles of revoking citizenship from dual nationals.
- The roundtable participants as a group voiced strong concern about the tone and type of questions in the national citizenship consultation online survey. They said it left little or no room for ethical consideration about the practice and processes around Australian citizenship. They felt a more general submission is required by ECCV to deal with broader democratic rights, as well as responsibilities of citizens.
- The current legislation is not very clear, for example what is meant by: “if someone fights against Australia”.
- For dual citizenship holders typical comments were: “Australia is our homeland. We should not be forced to go back to a place that we left.”
- A person gave the example that in the media it said in Norway they are welcoming people back and re-educating dissidents.
- One person made the point that a lot of British terrorists were home grown and didn’t even have ethnic backgrounds and that they adopted other cultural names.
- One person asked, “Is there a published list of organisations that the Australian Government considers to be terrorists? People asked how can we find out about such a list.
- People questioned why are we discussing the difference between the law and ministerial rights. A person commented that once we start something like this, there is an easy argument not to include other ethnic groups as well. “It is a degradation of civil society by stealth.”
- People want to demonstrate their rights in public and political life. Migrants are expected to participate fully in Australian life but how can people do that if they are considered as second class citizens.
- A typical comment was, “the fundamental thing that is important is to consider what citizenship means? It means to have the same rights and privileges as those who were born here. This point should be stressed rather than raise the issue of two classes of people in society – those with dual and solo citizenship.
- The issues of what’s deemed to be a terrorist was considered critical for example the man in the tragic siege of the Lindt cafe in Sydney was a crazy person but now he is portrayed as a terrorist.
- People questioned who determines what is terrorism?
- A person posed the issue: “What are the net results of someone being stripped of citizenship? Is this to make us fearful?
- One woman pointed out that the Australian Government wants to concentrate on the removal of citizenship however there is an
opportunity for us to shift the debate to a more important issue of talking about civil engagement and to reinvigorate that terminology instead. We should focus on the type of society that we want to live in. It might mean to engage in and with different communities that are also concerned about this. It is not just an "ethnic issue" but rather it affects the whole community.

- Participants pointed out that this opposition to revoking citizenship is led by broader human rights groups. They questioned whether the Australian Government is on the defensive and has a political agenda. One comment was, “The price we are going to pay for this is the creation of a two class system of people in society.”

- Another person commented that we need to restore the balance between accident and choice. To be born here is an accident whereas most of us here today are Australians by choice... We should uphold this principle. We need to stress this.

- Participants urged ECCV to take a lead role in the community debate on the issues of changes to Australian citizenship laws. They urged ECCV to assist them by providing easily accessible information about the Australian Government Community Consultation processes and web links so that more people in the multicultural community sector could make submissions.

- They felt it would be a great help to the grassroots voice of multiculturalism if other groups would make a submission or gain assistance in making them. People felt we should seek more community support such as from religious and human rights groups.

This summary transcript is a preview of the community consultation input gathered by ECCV for its submission the Australian Government on the proposed changes to citizenship laws.

This policy brief also provides insights into ECCV’s policy position on pertinent issues around multiculturalism and social cohesion in Victoria.