

Open letter to Mr. Kevin Rudd, Prime Minister of Australia and MP for Griffith

Re: Australian Citizenship Test

26/1/09:

Dear Mr. Rudd,

Last year, a friend of mine decided to take the Australian citizenship test after holding an Australian residency visa for ten years. Questions included what year the Melbourne Olympics were held and what sport was represented by the Ashes. Whereas a seven year old child could answer those questions, they were completely irrelevant as to whether a candidate would make a good citizen. The same goes for the notorious Don Bradman question.

If we include trivial questions in the citizenship test, we trivialise the test and we trivialise the value of our citizenship. We also miss out on a golden opportunity to include much more important information and concepts, which will be beneficial to those originally from countries which are less than democratic. Attached please find a proposal for a more substantial framework for the test.

Yours faithfully,

**Geoffrey Chia
(resident in your electorate)**

SUGGESTED INFORMATION PAMPHLET ON WHICH TO BASE THE AUSTRALIAN CITIZENSHIP TEST (drafted by G. Chia January 2009)

Dear Prospective Australian Citizen,

Australia has been called the “lucky country” and those who may qualify for citizenship such as yourself are fortunate indeed. Australia is blessed with abundant wealth and natural beauty, however our greatest assets have nothing to do with luck. Australia's greatest assets derive from her citizens and our values. We wish to share these values with you.

It is true that Australia's high material standard of living enables us to lead more comfortable, healthier and longer lives compared to many other countries. Material wealth alone however does not lead to a decent, fair or peaceful society. It is the continuous application of Australian values, requiring ongoing effort and participation by every citizen, which enables decency, fairness and peace to flourish in Australia, in a world which may otherwise be troubled by brutality, injustice and violent conflict.

AUSTRALIAN VALUES

Liberty and Freedom

We believe in the right of individuals to pursue their personal goals in life, free of external constraints or coercion, provided they do not contravene Australian laws and do not infringe upon the rights of others. For example:

Freedom of speech means the right to say (and write) what you wish, provided it is backed up by facts and evidence. Freedom of speech does not permit slander and libel based on lies.

Freedom to practice one's religion does not permit one to commit violent acts against others who follow a different belief system.

The enjoyment of personal rights and freedom requires that one must also respect the rights and freedom of other Australians. With rights come responsibilities.

Rule of Law

Rule of Law enables the settlement of disputes between parties without resorting to violence. It is the best mechanism by which we achieve peaceful conflict resolution and a just society. We accept that in a multicultural society, different individuals may have different values, customs and beliefs, however, all must agree that the law of the land, Australian law, will hold precedence and that all Australians must abide by such law, irrespective of their background. Practices such as “honour killing”, widow burning or female genital mutilation are considered criminal in Australia and are severely punishable under our law. “Cultural practice” is not an acceptable defence. Australian values demand that we enshrine laws to protect the more vulnerable members of our society.

This is not to say that all Australian laws are fair and just under all circumstances. We recognise that some laws can sometimes lead to inappropriate or unfair outcomes contrary to their original intent, in which case it may be necessary to modify or change them. We thus incorporate mechanisms to alter such laws, whether by parliamentary motion, citizens' petition, legal challenge or referendum. It is your right and responsibility to peacefully campaign for legal reform and to overturn unjust laws using due process. This is one important basis for a socially progressive nation.

Liberal democracy and participatory democracy

Free and fair elections enable the will of the majority to prevail and enable the peaceful transition of power from one government to another. Renewal of governments allows a country to adapt to changing circumstances. Winston Churchill said that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others. Democracy alone does not guarantee peace and justice and can even lead to perverse outcomes - “tyranny by the majority”. Indeed, Adolf Hitler was voted leader of Germany by democratic process, an example of illiberal democracy. Illiberal democracy

has been described as “two wolves and a lamb voting for what to eat for dinner”. Liberal democracy protects the rights of the lamb under Rule of Law. We believe the best form of government is liberal democracy, however this can only function properly with an educated, informed and engaged population.

As an Australian citizen, you will be required to participate in the democratic process by voting. You must understand the importance of your vote and how it works (see Appendix 1 for *Structure of Australian Government and Electoral Procedures*).

Separation of powers, transparency and accountability

If power becomes too concentrated among too few people, the result is tyranny. Democracy fails when it is perverted by media disinformation, is constrained by poor education or is starved by inadequate public participation, enabling tyranny to flourish. Separation of powers enables “checks and balances” within a system. The major pillars of power in society are the government, the judiciary (considered an independent arm of the government), the military, the police, the media and the corporations. Religious institutions may also wield considerable influence. We believe the military and the police should be under civil control. We believe in an independent judiciary which can challenge government or corporate decisions suspected of being improper, illegal or contrary to the public good. We believe in independent media which are empowered to investigate questionable processes within institutions whether they be the government, the judiciary, the military, the police, the corporations or indeed the media themselves. We believe the decision making processes within public institutions must be transparent and open, with information accessible to the public (as specified by the Freedom of Information Act), in order to minimise the risk of corrupt behaviour. Corruption is punishable under Australian law and leaders of all institutions which may impact the public must be accountable to the public. We believe in separation of Church from State and that government policies and decisions should be based on evidence, reason and fairness, the primary goal being the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people on a long term basis.

Equal Opportunity and Meritocracy

We believe all individuals should be considered equal in dignity and should be allowed equal opportunity to advance themselves - to achieve their greatest lifetime potential - in this, our “lucky country”. The principle of equal opportunity requires that we fund a public education system. However not all individuals are equally talented or driven. Communism failed around the world partly because it failed to reward individuals with talent and drive. It failed to recognise that it is these key individuals who enable society to function at its best and to advance as a whole. For example, not everyone can become a commercial airline pilot. In Australia, we only allow those with the requisite intelligence, discipline and physical ability; who have undergone exhaustive training, who have passed the designated theory and practical examinations and who have sufficient experience, to become airline pilots. We believe such talented people must be duly rewarded. This ensures the highest level of safety for passengers and therefore the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people. Similar considerations apply to other professions.

By ensuring that only the most capable, qualified and diligent people are appointed to key positions in society, irrespective of their ethnic or social background or family connections, we ensure that our systems will function to the highest possible level, to the benefit of all Australians.

A “Fair Go” for everyone: Social Justice, Anti-discrimination and Human Rights

Every country has some part of its history which is shameful and regrettable (see Appendix 2 for a few milestones in Australian history). To hide or deny such history is both cowardly and dangerous. Only by acknowledging our mistakes can we prevent their repetition, achieve reconciliation and move forward to achieve higher levels of social justice.

“Fairdinkum” and “fair go” are traditional Aussie phrases which will always be relevant through the ages. “Fairdinkum” means that we value “mates” (friends) who are honest and

trustworthy. Excessive corporate greed leading to environmental damage or to exploitation of ordinary “Aussie battlers” and loss of their retirement savings is not considered “fairdinkum”.

“Fair go” means that if you have been unfairly dealt with by any authorities, particularly on the basis of ethnic background, gender or sexual orientation, you are entitled to seek recourse via various mechanisms (eg. appeal to independent ombudsman, individual legal challenge or enforcement of fairer employment contract by group negotiation). Anti-discrimination policies are written into many of our employment conditions. “Fair go” also means we support fellow citizens who may have fallen on hard times. Catastrophic injury, illness or bad luck can befall any one of us at any time, thus suddenly destroying our capacity to earn. In other countries, this may lead to homelessness and starvation. In Australia, taxpayer funded income and food support for the disadvantaged and a public health system for those unable to afford private health insurance are essential safety nets which help citizens get back on their feet. .

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations International Bill of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

CONCLUSION:

As an Australian citizen you will have rights and responsibilities. The price we must pay for enjoying freedom and for maintaining a stable, peaceful and progressive society is that we must all engage in participatory democracy. This is why voting is compulsory.

As an Australian, your voice is important and needs to be heard.

Thank you for your kind attention.

APPENDIX 1

Structure of Australian Government (simplified):

There are three levels of government with their respective officials, bodies and geographic boundaries:

- Local (or Council or Municipal) government made up of Local Councillors
- State or Territory government made up of State or Territory Parliamentarians
- Federal (or Commonwealth) government made up of Federal Parliamentarians

The Federal Parliament consists of:

- the office of the Queen represented by the Governor General (appointed by the Prime Minister)
- the Lower House or House of Representatives made up of Members of Parliament (MPs) from the 150 electorates around the country and
- the Upper House or Senate made up of Senators. There are 12 senators from each of the six states and 2 senators from each of the two territories and their role is to scrutinise the power of executive government.

MPs and Senators achieve office by winning the majority of votes from their respective electorates and they may belong to any of the parties or may be independent politicians.

Ministers may be MPs or Senators. Governing ministers are from the majority party, shadow ministers are from the opposition party.

The Prime Minister is an MP from the Federal House of Representatives from the majority (ruling) party

More information is available at:

<http://www.peo.gov.au/faq>

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/infosheets/is20.pdf>

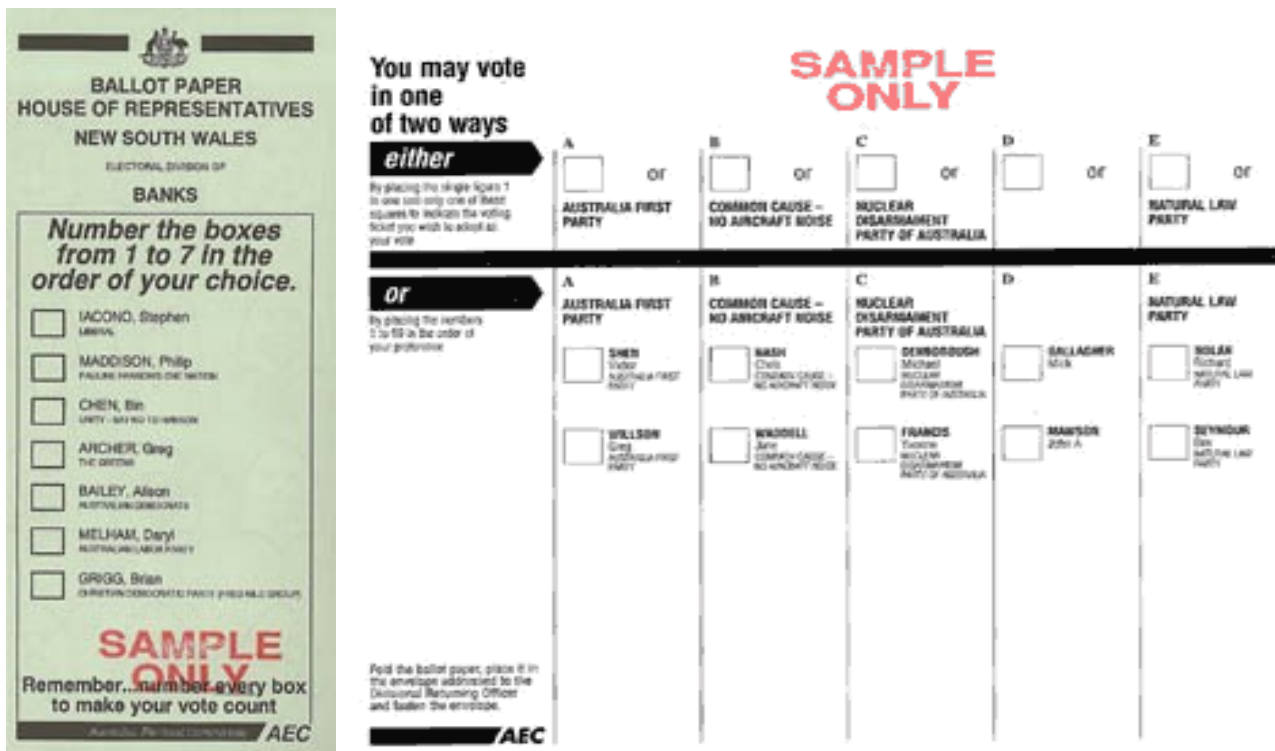
http://www.australia.gov.au/Our_Government

Electoral Procedures: (simplified):

Australia uses the system of preferential voting. This means that if a voter's first preference party does not win the majority of votes, that primary vote will then be allocated to another party as determined either by that party of first preference or by the voter's individual preference. Transferred preferences carry the same weight as primary votes. Supporters of the parties and individual candidates hand out "How to Vote" cards at the entrance to polling stations which voters are NOT obliged to follow.

House of Representatives ballot paper (small green form):

Voters number every individual candidate's box according to the voter's own preference. There is a risk that the vote will be declared invalid if any number in the sequence is inadvertently duplicated or omitted, hence great care must be taken.



Senate ballot paper (large white form):

Voters can either 'vote above the line' by placing the number '1' in a single box. In this situation, the party receiving the single primary vote is given the power to determine where the preference goes if that party does not win the majority of votes.

Alternatively, voters may 'vote below the line' by numbering every individual candidate's box according to the voter's own preference. In this option, there is a risk that the vote will be declared invalid if any number in the sequence is inadvertently duplicated or omitted, hence great care must be taken with this option. As there may be as many as 50 or 60 candidates on the ballot paper, voting 'below the line' is time consuming and carries a significant risk of being declared invalid due to a minor error.

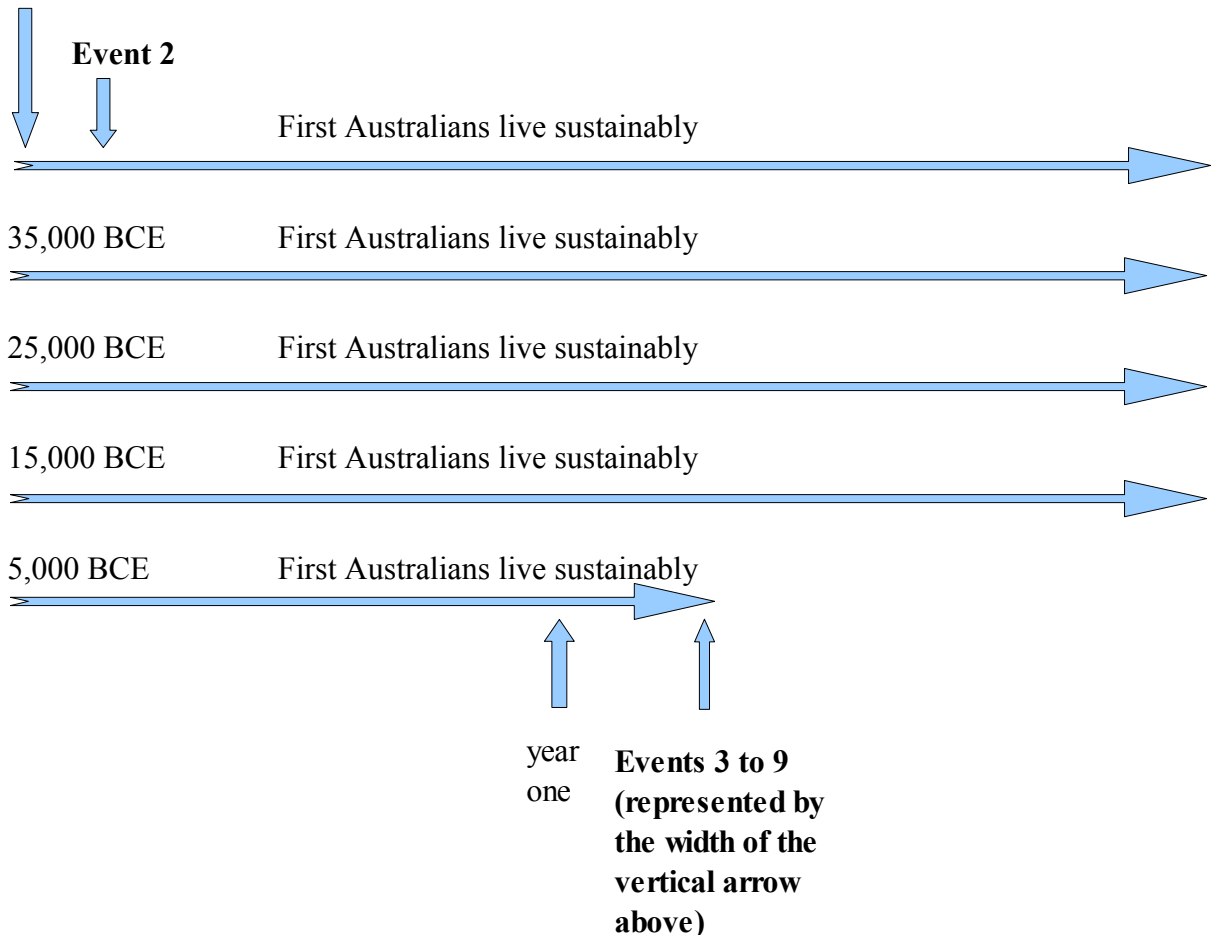
APPENDIX 2:

A few milestones in Australian History:

Event 1

45,000 BCE (approx):

First wave of Aboriginal Australians discover and settle Australia



Event 2: Extinction of megafauna completed (megafauna vanished within 1000 years of human settlement of *all* continents outside Africa)

Event 3: 1770: Captain James Cook maps the East coast of Australia

Event 4: 1788: First British settlement at Sydney Cove (Australia day is commemorated every 26 January)

Event 5: 1902: Australian women allowed to vote in federal elections

Event 6: 1915: Almost eleven thousand Australian and New Zealand troops die at failed invasion of Gallipoli, Turkey (ANZAC day is commemorated every 25 April)

Event 7: 1967: National Referendum on Aboriginal people: more than 90% of voting Australians agree that Aboriginals should be included in the Australian population census (Aboriginals had been regarded as "fauna" by the British Crown in the past). Aboriginals had the right to vote in some states prior to this date and in all states after this date

Event 8: 1975: White Australia policy abolished by Whitlam Labor government

Event 9: 2008: Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivers apology to Aboriginals for past mistreatment