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# The Weaponisation of Language:
## English Proficiency, Citizenship and the Politics of Belonging in Australia

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*Calls for greater protection of national boundaries – both physical and ideological – and the politicising of immigration and citizenship are increasingly characteristic of the global geo-political landscape. Several signatory countries to the UNHCR refugee convention have sought to legislate higher levels of language proficiency for citizenship eligibility. Most recently, this has been attempted in Australia, reigniting controversy about the use of language testing to assess a potential citizen's 'worthiness'. In this paper, we identify contested conceptions of belonging and citizenship, manifested in mediatised debates around language proficiency and citizenship which emerged following the announcement of proposed changes to Australian citizenship rules. We use Graff's (1981) concept of the 'Literacy Myth' to analyze associations between language proficiency and 'morality' evident in Australian media articles, to explore the underpinning discourses of these proposals, and to probe the relationship between citizenship, belonging and language. We argue that these myths work discursively to frame language proficiency as a proxy measure of the morality of prospective citizens and their willingness to 'integrate' or 'assimilate' into resettlement contexts. Relatedly, these myths can be deployed to justify the denial of the possibility of belonging to those who do not possess the linguistic capital privileged by policy and media elites.*

**Keywords**: Citizenship | Language Proficiency | 'Worthy Citizens' | Belonging | Australia

The questions of 'who belongs?' and 'who decides who belongs?' are central to contemporary debates on global citizenship. These often-unvoiced questions underpin legal and policy decisions regarding border control, migration policy, and citizenship, as well as less formalized cultural practices relating to identity and social inclusion and exclusion. Debates about political and cultural forms of belonging have also tacitly underpinned recent politicking with the resurgence of nationalistic politics underlined by conservative and even xenophobic ideologies about (im)migration and spatial, sociocultural and identity border protection. Instances of the 'right turn' of politics in the West can be seen in the reappearance of neo-Nazi movements across Europe, the election of President Trump, Brexit, and the closing of borders (e.g. Serbia, Hungary) to refugees and asylum-seekers from the Middle East.

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Most recently, this kind of politics has (re)entered the Australian political and discursive landscape. In April 2017, the conservative Australian government[i] announced its intention to change the law governing citizenship eligibility. As part of the ramping up of national security, Minister for Immigration and Border Protection Peter Dutton sought to tighten citizenship eligibility requirements by introducing a longer period of mandatory residency to be eligible for citizenship, and a more rigorous Australian Citizenship Test (ACT). More specifically, he proposed that applicants should demonstrate English-language proficiency to the equivalent of that required for entry to a university degree. These proposals triggered intense debate in media and civil society, with discussions revolving around the relationship between speaking English and 'being' Australian (in the past and present), as well as the duties or obligations of new citizens to their resettlement countries (Knoch, McNamara & Elder, 2017).

Although the government's Citizenship Bill failed to get passage in the Federal Parliament, significant questions remain about the increasingly complex politics of belonging engendered by the current contours of migration and globalization. Research in this area has documented an exponential increase in citizenship tests in the last decade (Byrne, 2017; Goodman, 2010). Furthermore, scholars have highlighted the deliberate and calculated use of language and citizenship as a technology of nation-state governance, a tool of demarcation, and a means of denying civic and political participation through 'non-citizenship' (Gerrard, 2016; Morrice, 2017).

It is in this context that we posit that English language proficiency is being used to 'weaponise' Australian citizenship discourse against more pluralistic and participatory conceptions of belonging and citizenship. We contend that the introduction of more stringent language requirements for citizenship has critical implications for belonging. Our analysis begins with discussion of the socio-historical contexts that shaped the use of language to regulate political and social participation in postcolonial Australia. Next, we explore discourses of 'good citizenship' in Australian news media. In concluding, we argue that debates about language proficiency and citizenship are fundamentally debates about the place of cultural diversity and the nature of participation in capitalist, democratic societies (Bagnall, 2010). We call for widespread and critical interrogation of discourses of citizenship that promote a singular, shared cultural 'identity', specific core national values, and particular forms and standards of language as indicative of 'moral character'.

## A Context for Exclusion on the Basis of Language

Similar to 'peer' wealthy, industrialized, Judaeo-Christian nations in North America (see Takaki, 2012; Zinn, 2016), the transition from assimilationist to multicultural Australia has been slow and uneven (Castles, 2004; Cox, 2010; Watkins & Noble, 2013). The response of the colonial and postcolonial state to culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged migrant groups[ii] has been dominated by discrimination, exclusion and segregation. Considerable disparities persist in terms of access to and quality of support services for different migrant populations, particularly in relation to learning or improving proficiency in English (Farrell, 2006; Terry, Naylor, Nguyen, & Rizzo, 2016).

Although an in-depth comparison is beyond the scope of this paper, the readership of this journal will note similarities between historical racialized and classed exclusions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women, non-English-speaking and non-Anglo peoples from Australian citizenship and similar trends in the United States

in relation to First Nations people, African-Americans, and immigrants and migrants from Europe as well as Majority World countries. However, two historical distinctions must be recognised which are relevant to developing a situated understanding of current contestations about citizenship and belonging in Australia. First Nations people in the USA hold a unique legal status which predates and is recognised by the US Constitution, while First Nations people in Australia do not (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2002). Furthermore, Australia has gained notoriety through the enforcement of mandatory detention of asylum seekers who arrive without documents – irrespective of age or family situation (Adams & Kirova, 2007). In this section, we describe the recent proposal to reform the citizenship test and then situate this within historical discourses about the relationship between language, belonging and citizenship.

### Proposal to Reform the Australian Citizenship Test (2017)

On April 20th, 2017, the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, and Minister Peter Dutton, issued a joint press release about proposed amendments designed to "strengthen the integrity of Australian citizenship" (2017). The proposed modifications were informed by the 2016 *Australian Citizenship: Your Right, Your Responsibility – The National Consultation on Citizenship Report,* and the 2016 Productivity Commission Report *Migrant Intake into Australia* (Fierravanti-Wells, 2017). In addition to changes in residency and test requirements, the proposed reforms included the requirement to successfully complete the citizenship test in three attempts or less.

The introduction of the current ACT in 2007 was also based on divisive notions of what it means to be Australian and the role played by language in making decisions about 'who counts' (Cox, 2010). The existing ACT requires applicants to correctly answer 75% of 20 multiple choice questions about Australian history, governance, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Proposed changes to 'strengthen' this test included the incorporation of more detailed assessment of applicant understanding and acceptance of 'Australian values', and a rise in the required English proficiency level to 'competent'. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull justified these reforms with the argument that 'being able to speak English' would ensure future citizens had the opportunity to succeed in Australia.

While specific details of the stand-alone English test to measure the 'competency' of applicants were never clarified, the government advised that all aspiring citizens would be required to demonstrate equivalent to Band Six 'competency' in reading, writing, listening, and speaking on an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) based examination (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). This is a standard of English usually reserved for determining admission to university or particular forms of employment.

This sweeping reform was proposed in a context in which language proficiency requirements only applied to individuals entering Australia through skilled and student visa pathways, not humanitarian streams. These differential criteria acknowledge the reality of under-developed literacies in the first language and variable English proficiency for many humanitarian entrants, due to interrupted schooling, overextended education systems, lack of funds to pay for education, or by virtue of the person's gender (UNESCO, 2015; Refugee Council of Australia, 2015, 2017). Recent statistics from the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2015) indicate that during the period 2014-15, on average, migrants from the skilled stream took 1.1

attempts to pass the current citizenship test, while those in the humanitarian stream required 2.4 attempts.

In addition, a submission from the Australian Human Rights Commission (2017) stated that many Australia-born citizens would not possess a written or spoken command of English equivalent to the Band 6 standard. The AHRC (2017) also estimated that anywhere between 30,000 and 40,000 new migrants each year in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) are "highly unlikely to meet the proposed English proficiency level for Australian citizenship in their first decade of settlement. Those on humanitarian visas may be disproportionately affected". Statistics of this nature and arguments by refugee advocates underlined the implications of the proposed reform: an underclass of migrants never able to attain Australian citizenship (FECCA, 2017).

After being debated in the Senate, the government's attempt at a citizenship "crackdown" (Koziol, 2017b)—as the proposal was described in *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper—was defeated. The last-minute compromise offered by Minister Dutton to reduce the language proficiency requirements from 'competent' to 'moderate' was unsuccessful, and an agreement between the other major political parties blocked the Bill from passing through the Senate.

## A Historical Overview of Language and Citizenship

Language has long been used as a gate-keeping device in Australia's colonial and postcolonial history (Buck & Frew, 2010). The use of language to select 'worthy' immigrants was evident in the so-called White Australia Policy, which was a suite of legislation adopted in 1901 to ensure migrant intake contributed to the imagined British 'national identity' (Jupp, 1988). Under this policy, any potential entrant to Australia could be required to undertake a dictation test, administered at the discretion of immigration officers, in any European language (Dept. of Immigration & Border Protection, 2017). While the policy governing the implementation of the dictation test made no reference to 'race', it functioned as a means of exclusion for those deemed unsuitable for migration, including for reasons of ethnicity (Manzo, 1995; Viviani, 1992). Proponents, including trade unionists and ministers from across the political spectrum, defended the dictation test and broader immigration platform as a means of maintaining 'national identity', economic growth, and social harmony.

The White Australia Policy was not just a means of restricting entry to the country. It was also a broad platform of legislation aimed at promoting a British culture and identity to the marginalisation and attempted genocide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The forced separation of children from families and communities occurred from the first days of colonisation, and an explicit policy of assimilation for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was instituted in 1937 (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997; AIATSIS, n.d.; Commonwealth of Australia, 1937). Segregationist practices in education, health care, and public spaces were widespread. It was not until 1962 that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were officially given the federal franchise (Australian Electoral Commission, 2006), with some groups recognised in the national census in 1967 (Taylor, 2016). The policy of forced removal of generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from their families and communities also impacted the rich diversity of language that existed pre-invasion (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997).

The election of the Menzies government in 1949 heralded a relatively more liberal attitude towards immigration policy, with the annual "allowance of 250 Asians to be given residence", the 1956 extension of temporary entry permits for an indefinite period to "distinguished and highly qualified Asian professionals", and the relaxing of some barriers blocking non-European naturalisation and citizenship (Jupp, 1988). However, the assurances of the then Minister for Immigration, Harold Holt, confirmed the commitment to restricting ethnic diversity, with his contention that there would be "no departure from the principles underlying the policy on immigration which every Government since Federation had followed" (No Change in Principle, 1950, p. 4). This sentiment was relayed in all major media publications of the time, although with the advice that in the application of the policy, the Minister could "exercise a reasonable discretion to meet particular circumstances" (No Change in Principle, 1950, p. 4). Therefore, for much of the first half of the twentieth century, there was general consensus among parties across the political spectrum in favour of restricting immigration according to ethnicity, although there were growing objections, particularly from the Left, following the 1950s until the easing of limits on non-European immigration in 1966, and the official dismantling of the White Australia Policy in 1972/3 under the Whitlam government (Theophanous, 1995).[iii]

## Methodology

This paper offers a critical analysis of Australian media texts to illustrate how the uptake and dissemination of the often-conflicting understandings underpinning the recent proposed reforms to Australian citizenship, fuel the politicization of interactions between language, belonging, and citizenship. The media is chosen for its significance as an important site for the construction, contestation, and dissemination of ideology (Thomas & Wareing, 1999; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). We view media constructions as creating specific versions of events, which express key values and views of the outside world, illuminating concepts of 'national-self' and the core beliefs about 'Australian-ness' held by text producers. As Stokes (1997) advises, "To assert an identity is always to construct an 'other' in more or less pernicious or benign ways…this construction of other…point[s] back to the national identity from which it emerges". In this paper, we seek to probe this dialogic notion of 'national identity', and the way this instantiation of 'us' and 'other' intersects with understandings of language proficiency and beliefs about suitability for citizenship.

We draw on the analytic and interpretive tools offered from the fields of critical discourse analysis, critical literacy studies and critical sociology to explore how constructions of Australian citizenship are used within these media texts, at times equating English language proficiency (of a particular type and standard) with an unarticulated set of Australian 'values'. In particular, we identify and analyse the linguistic (actual) and interdiscursive instantiations (Fairclough, 1995) of contested discourses around language proficiency and monolingualism, the idealised nation-state and cosmopolitanism, and the conflicting relationship between citizenship and a narrow range of unarticulated value statements about what it means to 'belong' to Australia.

In addition to exploring how notions of 'good citizenship' are signalled or explicated in three editorials that accompanied the government's announcement of proposed changes, and three articles that reported the rejection of the Bill, we also bring in other key voices and commentary from politicians, journalists, and refugee advocates, illustrating the complexity of the debate. By doing this, we seek to document

the process of "nation and narration" (Bhabba, 1990) that may be observed in media commentary surrounding the proposed changes to the citizenship test and in which 'Australian values' and cultural integration are constructed as quantifiable characteristics that may be identified and measured to determine 'who belongs'.

## Critical Media/ Policy Discourse Analysis and Graff's (1981) Concept of the 'Literacy Myth'

Drawing from Fairclough's (1992) model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we take a transdisciplinary approach to the exploration of the textual corpus, acknowledging the significance of language as inherently ideological rather than merely "factual, descriptive, performative or propositional" (Lankshear & McLaren 1993, p. 46). We seek to identify how semantic and grammatical elements of texts within particular social contexts, function to create "representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9).

We use Graff's (1981) concept of the 'Literacy Myth' to explicate the relationship between these concepts where literacy is used to "distinguish[es] one kind of person from another kind of person" with literate individuals considered "more intelligent, more modern, more moral" (Gee, 1996, p. 26). Graff (1981) identifies the fundamental shift that occurred in Western Europe by the mid-nineteenth century, in which mass education through literacy instruction came to be identified as essential to the reduction of crime and social disorder, and paramount to the inculcation of 'moral virtue':

> Literacy, the medium for training, consequently was rarely seen as an end in itself. More often, its possession or absence was presumed to represent either a symbol or a symptom of the progress in moral training or an index of what remained to be accomplished through the creation of educational systems embracing all children of the community. (p. 23)

As Graff (1981) further notes, literacy,

> …was expected to contribute vitally to the reordering and reintegration of the "new" society of the nineteenth century; it represented one single instrument and vehicle in the efforts to secure social, cultural, economic, and political cohesion in the political economy of the expanding capitalist order. (p. 25)

This conceptualisation of literacy as connoting unity, homogeneity, and social order among those who possess it, is evident in contemporary Australian media discussions of the proposed changes to language requirements for citizenship. For many political and social commentators, the attainment of 'competent' English language proficiency on an IELTS-based examination – which requires particular expertise in formal and academic literacies – functions as emblematic of commitment to widely espoused yet generally undefined notions of 'good citizenship' and 'Australian values'. In our textual analysis, we identify this ubiquitous conflation of a particular type and standard of English language proficiency with notions of 'good citizenship', and consider ways in which this association is perpetuated in order to uphold capitalist, neo-liberal conceptions of immigration and 'belonging'. We also explore contestations of this

instrumentalist view, in which broader humanitarian and pluralistic understandings of migrant intake and citizenship are espoused within media discourse.

**Media Texts**

Our textual corpus is drawn from 25 online news items (editorials, journalistic articles, published letters to the editor) from seven different news publications following the government's announcement of proposed changes to the citizenship law in April 2017. Readers will be interested to know that Australia's level of media ownership concentration is one of the highest in the world, controlled by a small number of corporations and interconnected family interests.[iv] Newspaper ownership is dominated by Rupert Murdoch's conservative News Corporation and the relatively more progressive Fairfax Media (no longer a family-owned company). These two news corporations together own the majority of national and capital city newspapers, including two of the publications selected for close analysis in this paper. Fairfax owns *The Age*, while News Corporation (Murdoch) owns *The Australian. The West Australian* is owned by Australia's largest diversified media business – Seven West Media.

The Citizenship Bill (which included draconian measures for naturalisation in addition to the English test) was blocked in the Senate on October 18, 2017. Online news media reported this development with relatively 'neutral' headlines and factual reporting of political negotiations in the Senate. The 'story' subsequently disappeared from the mediascape with little further editorial comment or discussion. Hence our analysis focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on the news coverage and editorials surrounding the announcement of the proposed reform in April 2017.

Table 1 presents information about the selected editorials and articles including headlines, date, nature of publication and author affiliation.

**Analytic Process**

In keeping with broad-based approaches to textual analysis, our investigation of media discourse surrounding the proposed changes to citizenship sought to identify recurring imagery, collocation, redundancy, and presupposition (Fairclough, 1995). We aimed to identify how these linguistic features act to foreground particular issues and agendas, privilege certain perspectives and voices, and construct various versions of citizenship, linguistic and cultural 'identity', and 'nation-hood'. We sought to read "with and against the text", to consider the 'ideal reader' and target audience, as well as those for whom the discursive constructions that dominate media debates surrounding citizenship are "not naturalised" (Janks, 1997, p. 331).

In this paper, we draw on selected editorials and articles that best exemplify the major themes and discursive constructions that dominated the debate regarding the proposal to change the ACT. We seek to explore how media texts may inform, exclude, and set the agenda for such social discussion. Central to this analysis, is the identification of the treatment of language – specifically IELTS Band 6 English language competency – as a tool to define and assess the 'worthiness' of potential citizens as informed by Graff's (1981) conceptualisation of the 'Literacy Myth'.

**Analysis & Findings**

**English and Being Australian in the Past**

The relationship between English, migration and the building of the Australian nation is a theme that cuts across debates about the Citizenship Test. While the historical period used within media texts as a point of comparison to contemporary Australia is not always specified, several media commentators refer to the period of immigration after 1945 which saw 7 million migrants make the island country their new home. Media texts supporting the proposed changes to citizenship eligibility share constructions of past immigration and political contexts as markedly different from those of today. This is exemplified in the *West Australian* editorial (Citizenship rule changes, 2017), in which the past is constructed as a 'simpler' time when it was possible to "welcome" migrants with minimal English, who would go on to contribute positively to the Australian community. In these simpler times, immigration functioned as a "two-way street" – mutually beneficial to migrant populations as well as resettlement countries (Citizenship rule changes, 2017). The editorial goes on to contrast the 'golden days' of times gone with the present-day geopolitical climate dominated by the imperatives of a knowledge/service-based economy and the rising incidence of terrorism in Western countries.

This theme of 'changing times' is also echoed in *The Australian* in the claim: "The government's changes, in response to global geopolitical and social changes, will serve to protect and strengthen our society" (Citizenship test changes uphold, 2017). The proposed amendments to citizenship are presented as essential for shaping a test that will better reflect the "different world" of twenty-first century Australia, and allow for the articulation of the type of citizens deemed worthy of inclusion (Citizenship test changes uphold, 2017). In this view, changes in external global events create the necessity for policy reform, with the Australian government merely acting to safeguard national interests.

In contrast, editorials opposing the changes to citizenship construct a vastly different image of the past compared to the 'simpler times' narrative. Clark's (2017) editorial in *The Australian Financial Review*, entitled "Test of citizenship goes against six decades of welcoming migrants", refers to discrimination under the so-called White Australia Policy and the linguistic and cultural enrichment of Australian society facilitated by the eventual dismantling of this legislation. For Clark (2017), the 'bad old days' are contrasted with modern multiculturalism, described as positively manifest in "the faces of the street in vibrant inner-city suburbs [which] are unrecognisable compared with a generation ago". This positive account of the present time is then contrasted with the foreshadowed impact of the government's suggested amendments to citizenship: "the Turnbull-led government signalled significant curbs on White Australia's multicultural successor".

Reece's (2017) *Herald Sun* editorial presents a similar construction of the enriching effects of cultural diversity and the contributions of successive generations of migrant peoples to modern Australia. He tells the personal story of his grandparents, who "would definitely fail the [proposed] English language test", and yet "raised a beautiful family with many great-grandchildren" as well as building "a textile manufacturing business that employed hundreds of Australians." These "sorts of stories" as Reece (2017) refers to them, are representative of a stream of texts from authors and commentators who, following the announcement of proposed changes to citizenship,

provided their own narratives of generations of migration, integration and 'nation building'. Notably, economic achievement remained an important marker of successful integration, even in media texts opposing the proposed changes to citizenship.

These contestations about the significance of a shared language in national development and integration resonate with Graff's (1981) critique of the conceptualisation of literacy as "a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward mobility" (p. 25). However, as Cox (2010) contends, the issue is not whether developing proficiency in English language (irrespective of level) is beneficial; the question is whether "compulsorily testing that proficiency helps people integrate and has an overall benefit for Australia" (p. 83). We agree with Cox's (ibid) argument that English language learning, and therefore increased proficiency and 'better' integration outcomes, could be promoted to new citizens through other policy mechanisms without the need for formalized testing systems.

Significantly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are conspicuously absent in many of the stories about nation-building. Within articles supporting the citizenship changes, there is no obvious consideration of the inconsistencies between claiming a multicultural national character—indeed restating Prime Minister Turnbull's (2016) claim to be the most successful multicultural nation in the world —and failing to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and languages, and mandating a form and standard of one language as a pre-requisite for citizenship.

**Being Australian Today: Worthy Citizens Speak 'Competent' English**

The joint media release from Prime Minister Turnbull and Minister Dutton (2017) claimed "English language proficiency is essential for economic participation. It promotes integration into the Australian community and social cohesion". Elsewhere, the Prime Minister advised that new citizens would be required to "speak English, share our values, be integrated" (Roberts, 2017). What went largely unexamined in news media discourse was the premise that only a score of Band 6 on the IELTS—a test usually reserved for academic and employment purposes—could guarantee the worthiness of an applicant for citizenship. Instead, the proposed changes were loosely described in press releases as aiming to ensure "applicants are competent in English" (Turnbull & Dutton, 2017). Media texts frequently used a question posed by the Prime Minister to frame the proposal as 'commonsensical' and even potentially advantageous to applicants: "Does anybody doubt that if you want to succeed, that if you even want to have a chance of succeeding in Australia, you need to be able to speak English?" (Citizenship test changes uphold, 2017). For instance, an *Australian* editorial supporting the proposed changes began with the claim "Proficiency in English will improve migrants' job prospects" (Citizenship test changes uphold, 2017). Here, particular forms of language and literacy are being used as markers for 'moral character' (Graff, 1981) and the 'worthiness' of potential citizens, and indicative of willingness to 'integrate' or 'assimilate' into resettlement contexts. Moreover, arguments that support English competency as essential to economic and social cohesion appeal to both reason and fear. In other words, it is necessary to distinguish the worthy citizen applicant from those seen as morally ambiguous and even dangerous.

**National Security and the 'Right Kind of People'**

An important theme within media discourse was the construction of language within the process of 'nation building' and its perceived relationship to 'values' and security. The following statement by Mr. Dutton was disseminated in the media a day before the proposal was announced: "We are living in a very different age than we were in even a decade or two ago…We've seen what's happening in North Korea, we've seen what's happened in Syria, Iraq, in parts of Europe. We need to make sure that we have the right people coming into our country" (Coorey, 2017). In this context, generalized statements regarding the connection between protection from global terrorism and modifications to citizenship eligibility were taken up in editorials that presented English language competency – of a certain form and standard – as key to national security. The *West Australian* editorial evoked the spectre of terrorism to highlight a "changed [the] equation" between migrant and resettlement countries, advocating a "tougher" standard of English language proficiency as much for national security as for economic and social integration (Citizenship rule changes, 2017).

Bergin (2017), writing for *The Australian Financial Review*, stated: "Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull wants us to come together and stand up for our values with confidence and pride". He went on to argue "It's a good thing that the Turnbull government is promoting liberal democratic values through new citizenship requirements…This should now be a core component of its plan to counter extremism: to defeat extremism we shouldn't forget that our own liberal values are the greatest weapon we have to combat bigotry" (Bergin, 2017). Drawing parallels with the American context, the editorial discussed the "national security benefits" of a "unifying national narrative around core values" with the declaration: "The US hasn't needed to adopt a strategy to boost its values in combating extremism – it already has a history of a strong national identity" (Bergin, 2017). Claiming to voice the 'national mood', the professional security analyst equated national security with a shared national identity where new citizens were expected to unreservedly "embrace our values, traditions and ideals". More troubling is Bergin's nationalistic call to "start taking back lost ground by clearly defining and asserting Australian values in a more convincing way than we've done before." He stated that the nation's "recent experiences with home-grown jihadism clearly shows how a lack of connection to Australian values can have dire consequences."

However, he omitted to explain the relationship between a test of values and a test of English language proficiency as outlined by Minister Dutton. Instead, the rhetoric of shared national identity is deployed to sanction what would appear to be a monocultural, English-only Australia where cultural plurality is obstructive to "our national strategy to combat extremism." The analysed editorials from the *West Australian*, *The Australian Financial Review*, and *The Australian* also portray an image of a normative English-speaking Australia under threat and 'losing ground' to immigrants who refuse the values of liberal democracy and Anglo culture.

**Being Australian Today: English as a Tool for Selective Inclusion**

This construction of core, common 'Australian values' including English proficiency is called into question in editorials that oppose the government's suggested changes to citizenship. *The Age* editorial states: "Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's nationalistic posturing on immigration is problematic, in part because its very premise – that there

are uniquely Australian values - is questionable and potentially divisive" (Struggling Prime Minister, 2017). This editorial describes Australia as "a place that derives so much strength from diversity and acceptance, a place where almost half of us were either born overseas or have at least one parent who was…" (Struggling Prime Minister, 2017). Here the imagined reader is not the monocultural, monolingual Australian targeted in other editorials, and 'Australian values' are redefined as universal "human values" – "not just Australian ones" (Struggling Prime Minister, 2017).

Relatedly, *The Herald Sun* editorial by Nicholas Reece suggests that patriotism is being used to suppress criticism of the government's proposed changes to citizenship. Recalling the interactions between Prime Minister Turnbull and a journalist questioning the citizenship changes, Reece (2017) relayed the Prime Minister's questions: "Are you proud of our Australian values? Are you a proud Australian? Well you should stand up for it. You should stand up for those values and that's what we're doing." Reece suggests that broader debate about the purposes and processes of citizenship is being obstructed by the identification of dissent as 'un-Australian' and/or a failure to assert 'Australian values'. *The Age* editorial also accuses the government of fear-mongering by engendering a "loaded debate blurred by "Australian values". Andrew Clark (2017), writing for *The Australian Financial Review* states: "Official explanations for the changes may take a vague moral high ground tone, but it is no coincidence that they have occurred as public fear about Islamist terrorism, and disquiet about militant Islam in Australia, have increased."

Media commentators who expressed opposition to the Citizenship Bill were far more likely to engage with the complexities of IELTS-based testing and the differential impact on different groups of migrants. Clark's (2017) *Australian Financial Review* editorial drew on the views of educators and refugee advocates to argue that "the new policy will not make much difference to the migration prospects of a highly credentialed IT worker with good English from, say, India or the Philippines. But it will be harder for a Muslim refugee from the Middle East or North Africa with little or no English who applies through official channels".

Henry Sherrell (2017), a Research Officer in the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University writing for *Inside Story*, provided the following compelling life story: "think about a Sudanese single mother with four children who is illiterate in her own language. To introduce a formal English-language test requiring IELTS 6 is to tell this woman she isn't welcome as an Australian citizen. And if you think this is a handpicked example on the margins of our migration program, Australia granted 1277 "Woman at Risk" visas in 2015-16". Sherrell (2017) also raised concerns regarding the impact on families where children may pass the IELTS-based test more easily than their parents or grandparents – effectively meaning only portions of the family would ever be entitled to citizenship.

These media commentators also examined Liberal Party politicians' claims that Labour ministers were overstating the difficulty of attaining Band 6 IELTS. Announcing that the citizenship test of language would be based on the General IELTS test rather than the Academic version, Mr Dutton asserted that this would offer an easier standard for aspiring citizens. Koziol, (2017a), writing for *The Sydney Morning Herald,* solicited the opinion of world-renowned expert in language assessment, Dr. Catherine Elder of Melbourne University. Also the president of the International Language Testing Association, Elder clarified that while the General and Academic tests of IELTS targeted different types of language proficiency, the Band 6 standard was the

same in terms of difficulty. She went on to unequivocally state that neither test was appropriate for determining citizenship eligibility (Koziol, 2017a).

**Media Coverage of the Rejection of the Citizenship Bill**

The failure of the Bill to pass in the Senate was reported extensively. However, as previously mentioned, coverage primarily took the form of brief factual articles with no editorial comments or analysis. The description of the event was figuratively nuanced with phrases such as "dying quietly in the Senate" and "quietly killed off" (Koziol, 2017b), as having been "defeated" and "tossed out" of the Senate, with Mr Dutton said to have "suffer[ed]ing a bruising defeat" (McCulloch, 2017) but also "vow[s] ing to fight for [the] citizenship shake-up" (Kelly, 2017). The English language requirement of the ACT was emphasised as the most objectionable element of the Citizenship Bill, and the main reason for its dismissal. This was despite the fact that the Liberal Party offered to lower the required standard of English from 'competent' to 'modest' during eleventh hour negotiations in the Senate. The media relayed claims from politicians opposed to the Bill who suggested its failure was "a great win for multicultural Australia and the thousands of people who have been in limbo since the policy was announced" (McCulloch, 2017). Security concerns, fears about economic development and social cohesion—all issues raised in support of the initial proposal—were largely absent from the media coverage of its rejection.

**Conclusions**

Citizenship tests have been a focal point of debates about belonging in Australia, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other European countries where the test is a relatively recent requirement for naturalisation (see; Byrne, 2017; Joppke, 2013; Morrice, 2017; Wright, 2008). A key tension in these contemporary debates is concerned with the balance between unity and diversity (Banks, 2004). Underlying these debates are longstanding assumptions about how identity and belonging work in a postcolonial, Commonwealth country, and more specifically how 'national identity' should be cultivated and maintained. As Buck & Frew (2010) contend, these debates result from the legacy of Australia's colonial history, leaving Australia as a "prisoner of its past" (p. 30).

The Australian media texts analysed in this paper reflect competing conceptions of belonging and citizenship. This analysis has shown that calls to introduce an IELTS band six proficiency requirement for citizenship reveal a similar association between privileged forms of language and 'moral character' that underpin the 'Literacy Myth' (Graff, 1981) – the notion that competency in certain forms of English can act as a marker for willingness to 'integrate' (or assimilate) into resettlement contexts. In this way, language proficiency is deployed as a substitute measurement of 'morality' and is a powerful means of exclusion for those who do not possess the linguistic capital privileged by the dominant groups in Australian society, including policy makers and media commentators. However, as Cox (2010) argues, the conflation of citizenship testing, language proficiency requirements and Australian values/Australian identity is "superficial and misleading", speaking more to electoral politics than to determining a potential citizen's values and language proficiency (p. 95). What is clearly missing from this argument is a holistic view of language: one that recognizes the complexities of language learning, the sociocultural terrain in which language is learnt, the distinction

between language and literacies, and the production of language in high-stakes testing contexts. Without a nuanced and contexualised understanding of language underpinning these proposed policy changes, there is strong potential for differential citizenship to leave many migrants to remain subjugated, invisibilised and powerless.

Thus, we submit that debates about the level of English language proficiency desirable for new Australian citizens can be seen as a proxy for debates about what it means to be an Australian citizen today. For advocates of the proposed changes to the citizenship test, English language becomes a gatekeeper or sorting mechanism to weed out the 'desirables' from the 'undesirables' on grounds of 'shared values', social cohesion and economic development. From this perspective, elevated English language requirements protect not only Australia's borders and national security, but tacitly safeguard Australia's privileged position as a wealthy country by admitting only those with demonstrated capacity for economic contribution or those who can be trained to do so at relatively low cost, with the commensurate consequence of excluding those whose potential is seen to be inhibited by lower levels of English language proficiency. And yet, as Treganza (2010) cogently argues, "The more political leaders (particularly those of a conservative stripe) feel the need to self-consciously assert Australian values, the more they seem to reinforce the subjectivity and contestability of such values" (p.73).

Ultimately, these perspectives reflect a neoliberal conception of multiculturalism and a differential view of citizenship that advocates social cohesion without the need for economic and social equality and justice. This 'either-or' way of thinking assumes that sociocultural difference can only be dangerous to the existing social order and therefore becoming and being Australian requires applicants to adhere to the sociocultural norms of the dominant, with increasing erosion of formally recognised (in this case linguistic) diversity (Slade, 2010). As our analysis shows, it then becomes possible to offer citizenship based on differentiated linguistic criteria using the logic of being 'efficient' about diversity. It also becomes possible to ignore the racial and faith-based hierarchical contradictions within this logic of efficiency, where on the one hand highly-skilled workers from 'problematic' ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Syrian Muslims) must scale ever rising barriers to naturalisation, while cosmopolitan, transnational migrants transverse national borders and are highly valued as (economic) citizens of the world. As Kymlicka (2004) argues, this group of elites are privileged enough to learn influential world cultures and languages in order to enhance "their economic opportunities and cultural capital in a globalized world". Being multicultural in this sense does not require an understanding and respect for the "histories, identities, and cultures of the groups with whom we share a common state" (Kymlicka, 2004, p. xvi). Under this logic, people seeking asylum and those with refugee experiences from 'problematic' ethnic backgrounds become "disposable" – to borrow the term from Zygmunt Bauman (2000) – with little consideration of the role of wealthy countries in the armed conflicts that render these people homeless and stateless in the first instance.

And yet, a contrasting perspective evident in the media texts analysed in this article is less fearful of the kinds of social change that accompany cultural pluralism. This perspective argues that multiple identity affiliations to domestic and transnational communities, strengthens – not weakens – the Australian national fabric through valuable contributions of language and culture. However, our analysis also shows that a dominant framing of these debates in corporate news media is predicated on conflict between old and new, traditional and modern – ahistorical and binary categories that do little to support the informed and democratic dialogue needed for citizenship.

To conclude then, the role of language in opening and closing opportunities for citizenship remains contested, and complementary debates about belonging are not just about the value or burden of cultural difference, but are also shaped by economic worldviews. As decades of critical scholarship have shown, neither citizenship nor multiculturalism have ever been simple or inherently inclusive ideas. The increase in transnational migration globally, and the impact of this on wealthy, industrialised nation-states in particular, has arguably intensified historical tensions and contradictions in these ideas. We contend that our analysis of mediatised representations of the proposal for increased language proficiency requirements for Australian citizenship illustrates the dominance of two historical processes on debates about who is 'worthy' of belonging, and what forms of linguistic and cultural capital can demonstrate this worthiness: colonisation and the emergence of the neoliberal global economic and cultural order (Buck & Frew, 2010; Castles, 2017). While current migration policies such as the citizenship test increasingly function to protect the privileges and entitlements of the wealthy nations, we submit that the debate about Australia's citizenship test represents an opportune moment to reimagine a national project that removes proficiency in dominant languages from considerations of citizenship, especially for the most vulnerable amongst us.

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Table 1:
*Texts Selected for Analysis*

| Title | Date | Publication | Section | Author & Affiliation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Struggling Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull plays immigration card | April 20, 2017 | *The Age* | Editorial/opinion | No Author/NA |
| Citizenship test changes uphold Australian values | April 21, 2017 | *The Australian* | Editorial/opinion | No author/NA |
| Test of citizenship goes against six decades of welcoming migrants | April 21, 2017 | *The Australian Financial Review* | Editorial/opinion | Andrew Clark/NA |
| Citizenship rule changes a good way to support Aussie values | April 21, 2017 | *The West Australian* | Editorial/opinion | No author/NA |
| Citizenship test reinforces important Australian liberal democratic values | April 26, 2017 | *Australian Financial Review* | Editorial/opinion | Anthony Bergin, senior analyst, Australian Strategic Policy Institute and Australian National University's National Security College |
| New citizenship laws fail three commonsense tests | April 26 | *Herald Sun* | Editorial/opinion | Nicolas Reece, Principal Fellow, University of Melbourne and host of Politics HQ on Sky News |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| Citizenship crackdown quietly killed off by Senate | October 19, 2017 | *The Age* | News | Michael Koziol/NA |
| Peter Dutton vows to fight for citizenship shake-up | October 19, 2017 | *The Australian* | News | Joe Kelly/NA |
| Federal Government's citizenship changes defeated in the Senate | October 19, 2017 | *The West Australian* | News | Dan McCulloch/NA |

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[i] At the time of writing, Australia is governed by a Liberal Party-National Party coalition parliament, which broadly takes a right-of-centre political approach, but also has vocal further-right factions seeking to drive policy development.

[ii] It may be useful to clarify that in the Australian context the term immigrant is used for people from other parts of the world who come to Australia for long-term or permanent settlement, while the term migrant denotes temporary or short-term visitors (e.g. international students, backpackers, seasonal agricultural migrant workers and so forth).

[iii] We acknowledge that the date for the official abolishment of the White Australia Policy is contested.

[iv] See infographic here https://theconversation.com/factcheck-is-australias-level-of-media-ownership-concentration-one-of-the-highest-in-the-world-68437