

New language barrier no way to build a tolerant society

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Citizenship tests are all the rage globally, but that doesn't make them good, writes Anne Summers.

ANDREW Robb has proposed that new citizens in Australia would "more quickly and effectively integrate into our Australian family" if they were to learn our language and "something about our history and heritage". Robb is a rookie parliamentary secretary, widely assumed to have been put into the Immigration and Multicultural Affairs portfolio to curb the inclinations of the minister, Senator Amanda Vanstone, to give a bit of stick to asylum-seekers.

But it seems the former federal director of the Liberal Party and the man who attributed the 1996 landmark election victory to "Howard's battlers" has a much bigger agenda.

Robb's rationale for the language and citizen tests is, he told the Sydney Institute last week, "the twin challenges of global terrorism and the ageing population". Huh? Does he seriously expect that 20 million Australians all speaking the Queen's English and knowing their Ned Kelly from their Nellie Melba will deter terrorism?

Perhaps Robb missed the television footage of the British-born London Underground bombers, speaking with strong regional English accents, before they embarked on their deadly mission.

And how will a culturally aware citizenship increase the birthrate?

Since second-generation immigrants to Australia tend to follow the local practice of women having fewer babies, it might make more sense to keep this local custom a bit of a secret. Nor is it a secret that Australia's commendable family reunion migration policies add to the age of our population. Will getting a Cantonese granny to speak Strine make any difference to that profile?

Citizenship tests are all the rage globally at the moment. The United States, Canada and Britain all have them, the Dutch have just introduced a very controversial one and Germany and Israel are thinking about it.

The Germans also think such a test might address one of the concerns about their plunging birthrate - the fact that Turkish women give birth at four times the rate of

German women. In other words, the tests are about exclusion - about creating barriers to immigration, especially to those seeking to come from countries with very different cultural norms and practices.

The Dutch do it in two ways. They don't just make prospective immigrants watch a video showing gay men kissing and nudists cavorting on a beach, they also charge \$550 a pop for taking the test - plus \$105 for the video! The aim there, apparently, is to repel conservatives with the images of the tolerance of Dutch society and to deter the indigent with the hefty price tag.

What will our strategy be? The degree of difficulty is already pretty high for any newcomer. It's not so much, "Where the bloody hell are you?", but "How in the hell are you going to cope once you arrive?" Even Septics and Poms - supposedly English-speakers - need to learn such iconic words as stirrer, bludger, dobber, sickie, dunny, drongo, whinger and knocker.

Then there are the unique expressions: "stone the crows", "strewth!", "flat out like a lizard drinking", "flash as a rat with a gold tooth", "off like a bride's nightie". These might be self-explanatory once you crack the accent but who's going to explain the colloquialisms, decode the untranslatable: "tide's out", "your shout", "mad rooter", "spare prick at a wedding", "getting off at Redfern" - examples of a language that has evolved in all sorts of idiosyncratic directions since its British origins.

New immigrants can take a history and geography test. In Germany they will be asked to name the country's three highest mountains, in Canada they need to know the origins of the national day but to really get on in Australia you need to know about Woop Woop and Bong Bong, not just Wagga Wagga and Botany Bay.

You need to have heard of Pig Iron Bob and the Silver Bodgie and it wouldn't hurt if you knew about Phar Lap and Phuc Tuy and that our most famous bushranger's last words as he stepped forward to the noose were "such is life".

It would also help to know that our unofficial national song is about a sheep-stealing itinerant who commits suicide to escape the law. (Fortunately, this was in the days before personal detonators.)

We'll ask newcomers to respect our culture and traditions yet they'll soon learn they are referred to as reffos and wogs, chinks and slopes, gyppos and lebbos. Earlier this year the whole world saw the cracks in our once-strong multiculturalism on ugly display with signs at Cronulla Beach saying "Osama don't surf" and "We grew here, you flew here".

Not exactly a good basis on which to build trust and tolerance among diverse cultures. Yet is this the constituency Andrew Robb is really addressing? Is he saying out loud, let's make our newcomers learn about mateship and a fair go, about Gallipoli and Kokoda and the Australian way, while in fact he's pushing buttons, talking code, using the dog whistle

and saying under his breath: let's keep 'em out, the towelheads (hear terrorists) and the elderly (hear too old to learn English)?

Let's hope this isn't what he's saying because, if he were, it would mean Australia was heading in the nasty, exclusionist and extremely scary direction of Holland and Germany and other countries of western Europe which have proved unable to absorb culturally immigrants they initially wanted to do their manual labour and now want to get rid of. Australia once trod a rather more successful path of absorption and inclusion. There seems no reason to change that.

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