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MEDIA RELEASE

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Citizenship Linked to English Test - Misses the Mark & the Serious Issues

Director of the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (CMYI), Carmel Guerra, has criticised suggestions that migrants would need to pass a compulsory test of their English skills and knowledge of Australian values before they were awarded citizenship.

The introduction of a compulsory English language test will not determine the suitability of an individual to be a good Australian citizen; it's really only a measure of one's capacity to have learnt a new language.

Citizenship is based on someone's commitment to the country and respecting democracy and the rule of law. How will an English test measure that? We need to look at the fact that many post-war migrants have contributed enormously and integrated into the Australian community. Many took up citizenship without having a functional understanding of English at the time.

The suggestion comes within a broader context that shows that the debate around cultural identity needs to be reassessed.

"When we hear of politicians talking about a notion of Australian values we need to ask what are they and who prescribes them? Constructing myths about a homogenous Australian culture or values is only alienating those who did not fit that prescribed notion," says Ms Guerra.

If the introduction of the test is suppose to be in some way dealing with the threat of terrorism, shouldn't we be promoting dialogue that promotes understanding of difference and encouraging a rational debate about how global terrorism is impacting on communities in Australia? Should we not be asking why groups of alienated young people are being drawn into extremist movements?

"We need specific strategies that look at the reasons why some groups of young people are being drawn into extremist movements, and deal with the causes not the symptoms. Let's remember, Australia is a leader in the settlement of refugees and in dealing with cultural and religious diversity. We should be promoting dialogue that promotes understanding of difference and a rational debate, not suggesting new tests that miss the mark and don't address the serious issues facing Australia," says Ms Guerra.

CMYI is a community based organisation that advocates for the needs of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

In supporting young people, CMYI combines policy development and direct service delivery within a community development framework. This approach gives CMYI strong connections with young people and their communities while enabling positive change on a local, state and national level.

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