Reflections on Australian Citizenship

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Since developing Australian citizenship in the mid-Twentieth Century, the nation has struggled to find the right approach, with five pledges used in five decades, as may be seen in the following short survey.

In **1901** at Federation, Australians were not citizens of Australia, but of Britain.

In **1948** Australian Citizenship was created, and it took effect from 1949. From that date, candidates for citizenship made the following Oath of Allegiance:

> *I*, A. B; *swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty King George the Sixth, his heirs and successors according to law, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Australia and fulfil my duties as an Australian citizen.*

From **1966** all persons pledging themselves as Australian citizens were required to renounce all foreign allegiance, but received the optional choice of making no reference to God when they made their promise:

> *I*, A. B., *renouncing all other allegiance, swear by Almighty God* [*or solemnly and sincerely promise and declare*] *that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the Second, Her Heirs and Successors according to law.*

In **1973** the wording was changed so as to refer to the *Queen of Australia*.

In **1986** the renunciation of foreign allegiance was removed on the advice of the Human Rights Commission. Further, the government removed the requirement that candidates state their names when taking the oath or making the affirmation. This provided efficiency to the citizenship ceremony, but diminished the personal nature of the process, and undermined the professed testimony of each candidate. Indeed in legal proceedings the first duty of the witness is to state his or her full name.

In **1993** the government removed reference to the Crown, and formulated the Australian Citizenship Pledge:

> *From this time forward,* [*under God,*]* *I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people, whose democratic beliefs I share, whose rights and liberties I respect, and whose laws I will uphold and obey.* *[The phrase *under God* is optional].

While the optional phrase *under God* is preferred by most candidates at their citizenship ceremony, the option is not available to existing citizens at such events, if the ceremony provides opportunity for existing citizens to re-state their allegiance, since a differently worded Affirmation is used:

> *As an Australian citizen, I affirm my loyalty to Australia and its people ...* [then as wording above].

As well as providing no reference to God, the use of two different formulations of wording undermines memorisation and recitation. This contrasts with the situation in the USA, whereby students daily recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and one set of words suffices for candidates and existing citizens.

In **2002** Australians who acquired another nationality no longer automatically lost their Australian citizenship.

In **2007** a citizenship test was introduced, which required most candidates to demonstrate their knowledge of English and of aspects of Australia's values, history, culture, geography, national symbols and emblems, its parliamentary system of government, and the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship.

In **2009** a new citizenship test was formed. Written using plain English, it has no mandatory questions, and required a pass mark of 75% (up from a previous 60%). Based on the Australian Citizenship Pledge, it tested knowledge of Australia and its people, democratic beliefs, rights and liberties, and our government and laws.

In **2011** the government confirmed that candidates may bring a Bible or other holy book to ceremonies. While citizenship ceremony regulations ban the promotion of religious concepts, as recently as the 1970s New Testaments were presented to new citizens. However, "councils and community organisations conducting citizenship ceremonies may choose to present gifts to new citizens" and this may include Bibles.

In **2017** several federal MPs realised they held foreign allegiance, contrary to the Constitution, and resigned.