



People brought to Australia under the Federal Government's refugee resettlement program have the most to lose from foreshadowed changes to the citizenship process, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) says.

RCOA chief executive officer Paul Power said the tougher English language requirements and the restrictions on the number of times an applicant can sit the citizenship test would most likely result in fewer former refugees seeking citizenship and more failing in their attempts to become citizens.

"The sad irony is that people who have come to Australia as refugees value the freedom and security associated with Australian citizenship more highly than any other group in the nation," Mr Power said.

"People who have experienced persecution and oppression have a much greater understanding of the importance of Australia's freedom and democracy than those of us who have always lived in a free society.

"Some refugees are stateless and all others have lost the effective protection of their state of citizenship. It means so much to be welcomed to Australia and many people in this situation want to demonstrate their thanks to their new homeland by taking up citizenship as soon as possible.

"For decades, refugee and humanitarian entrants have sought citizenship at higher rates than any other category of migrants. However, this wish to become an Australian citizen has been undermined by a citizenship test process which sees much higher failure rates for former refugees than applicants who have come on migration visas."

Department of Immigration and Border Protection statistics show that in 2014-15 the citizenship test

failure rate for refugee entrants was 8.8%, six times higher than the average of 1.4%. The average number of citizenship tests attempted by refugee applicants was 2.4, double the average of 1.2.

A [2008 review](#) of the citizenship test, led by retired ambassador Richard Woolcott, warned against a testing regime which was intimidating and discriminatory. The review highlighted the importance of special consideration for refugee and family migration entrants who have had disrupted or limited formal education and are struggling to learn English as adults.

"While the majority of refugee and humanitarian entrants are children and young people who typically learn English quickly, those brought to Australia as refugees include some older adults, torture survivors and people with disabilities who struggle to master English. These are the people who are most likely to miss out on citizenship under the changes being planned by the Government," Mr Power said.

"In his Australia Day message for 2017, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull described Australia as the 'most successful multicultural nation in the world'. Mr Turnbull needs to reflect carefully on how that was achieved, on why is that Australia has been more successful than some European nations which have treated groups of migrants as long-term guest workers with no serious role in national life.

"Australia's social cohesion is not threatened by some older refugees who are not fully fluent in English gaining the citizenship of the country they have come to love. We have more to lose if a growing group of Australian residents feel that they are not really welcome, that they have no long-term stake in building the nation.

"On Australia Day, Mr Turnbull described Australia's sense of justice as being based on solidarity, mutual respect and lending a helping hand to people who fall behind. I see none of these values in his announcement about citizenship, just more punishment and more exclusion for people whose voices and contributions to Australia are all too easily ignored."

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