Refining The Tests That Confer Citizenship

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Body

Where does Father Christmas come from? How old do you have to be to buy a lottery ticket? If your adult son declares he's a homosexual, what do you do? If a film or a book insults your religious feelings, what is your reaction? Why are aboriginal peoples seeking self-government? Who has the power to declare war?

Answering such questions appropriately may not define you as a citizen of the world, even in this era of supposed globalization, but it would help get you ***citizenship*** in Britain (the first two questions), Germany (the second two), Canada (the next) or the United States (the last). Perhaps never before in human history has so much energy been devoted to trying to establish ***citizenship tests*** to define national identity. Judging from the debates raging and the confused choices made, there is as little agreement within each country as there is between them.

In the United States, discussions about creating a new ***citizenship test*** have been going on for a decade. About $3.5 million has been spent since 2001 when the Immigration and Naturalization Service promised a redesign. In 2004, a report from the National Research Council recommended more bureaucratic consultation, leading to concern that the process was going to become an extended series of debates. A nonprofit concern, the American Institutes for Research, was then asked to make a more practical "feasibility study." Tomorrow, the ***Citizenship*** and Immigration Service (the successor to the I.N.S.) will announce recommendations about how much the ***tests*** should be modified or whether they should be changed at all.

Britain, meanwhile, introduced a new ***citizenship test*** in November and is beginning formal induction ceremonies like those in America. Last week, the newspaper The Guardian reported that the Netherlands was beginning a pilot program in which ***tests*** about Dutch language and culture would be administered to prospective immigrants in their native countries; the government also planned to require all immigrants who stay in the Netherlands more than three years to take ***citizenship*** classes. And earlier this month, the Baden-Wurttemberg region of Germany instituted questions to be asked only of Muslims from particular countries -- questions dealing with women's rights, religious freedom and domestic life.

One reason for the flurry of activity has been just what the German questions so bluntly address: the phenomenon of Muslim immigrants and citizens in Europe who not only are segregated from a nation's culture but also hostile to it. In 2004, for example, a poll found that 21 percent of Muslims in Germany believed the Koran and the German Constitution were incompatible. Hence these attempts to establish a shared identity based on particular beliefs and facts.

But which ones? Even where the notion of identity would seem to be fairly secure, notions of ***citizenship*** can be slight. In Britain, the Home Office minister in charge said the new procedures were meant to "help new citizens to gain a greater appreciation of the civic and political dimensions of British ***citizenship***." But while the 45-minute ***test*** includes questions about the structure of the British government and stresses Britain's religious identity ("What is the Church of England and who is its head?"), the main emphasis is on the ***test***'s title: "Life in the U.K."

Judging from news reports and sample questions, the ***test*** treats British culture not as a product of centuries of evolution and political struggle with stunning achievements (and failures) -- in fact, there is almost no history on the ***test*** at all -- but as a set of practical behaviors along with correct attitudes toward women and ethnic minorities. The practical can be trivial: If you spill someone else's beer in a pub, what should you do? What is the voltage of British electric outlets? It is as if too much shouldn't be expected, because there is not too much worth championing. Prospective citizens less fluent in English are met with even lower expectations: they take a "skills for life" course instead of an exam and demonstrate their competence to the instructor.

By comparison, the existing American ***test*** of history and civics knowledge seems fairly robust. Objections to it arose partly because in the 1990's -- a record decade for immigration -- standards had become so lax, that in many cases background checks of aspirants failed to turn up significant criminal records. In 1997, the Commission on Immigration Reform also found that there was no consistency in administering or scoring the ***tests***; often delivered orally in regional offices, they were sometimes informally scaled by the examiners. The commission also objected to the ***tests***' reliance on memorization of facts rather than on broader concepts.

When the redesign began in earnest in early 2001, "stakeholder groups" -- social service and legal agencies, schools, advocates for immigration -- objected, some arguing that the intention was to make the ***test*** more difficult and leave less discretion for the examiners. The planned date for a new ***test***, 2006, has been abandoned; Alfonso Aguilar, the chief of the Office of ***Citizenship***, suggests that a more realistic goal would be 2007 or 2008.

The current ***test*** covers a fair amount of trivia: the name of the Pilgrims' ship; in which month a president is inaugurated. But there are also important questions about government structure ("Why are there 100 senators in the Senate?") and ideas ("What is the basic belief of the Declaration of Independence?"). No specific replacement questions have been publicly proposed.

"We see the ***test*** as an instrument to promote civic learning and patriotism," Mr. Aguilar said in a telephone interview last week. The purpose, he said, is not to limit immigration but to create a system in which the process of naturalization works. "Our history has been one of expanded ***citizenship***," he said.

A new ***test*** could do no better than emphasize that point and demonstrate the kinds of commitments made in ***citizenship***. The process, after all, is called naturalization because it really does change the alien into the natural, the foreign into the familiar. The immigrant is giving up one identity and taking on another; in the process, both country and citizen are transformed.

This has tended to be easier in the United States, where the very idea of the nation is bound up with immigration, than in countries whose idea of the nation is bound up with an inherited past. Yet now, even European nations must present themselves in another form, as sets of ideas and customs, as cultures being offered in exchange for sacrifices demanded. That social contract is not being negotiated with much confidence in Britain, and it seems shaky enough elsewhere, too. The United States generally seems more sure of what it is offering; coming months will show how sure it is of what it is asking.

Border Patrol

Here are some sample questions from the new ***tests***:

Britain

How interested are young people in politics? What do they see as the main issues today?

Do women have equal rights and has this always been the case?

How many people say they have a religion and how many attend religious services? What are the largest religious groups?

Where are Geordie, Cockney and Scouse dialects spoken?

What are quangos and non-departmental public bodies?

Baden-Wurttemberg

What is your position on the statement that a wife should belong to her husband and that he can beat her if she isn't obedient?

What do you think about parents forcibly marrying off their children? Do you think that such marriages are compatible with human dignity?

Your fully grown daughter/your wife wants to dress like other German women. Would you try to stop that? By what means?

Imagine that your grown son comes to you and declares that he is a homosexual and wants to live with another man. How would you react?

Sources: www.lifeintheuktest.gov.uk, www.islam.de.

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