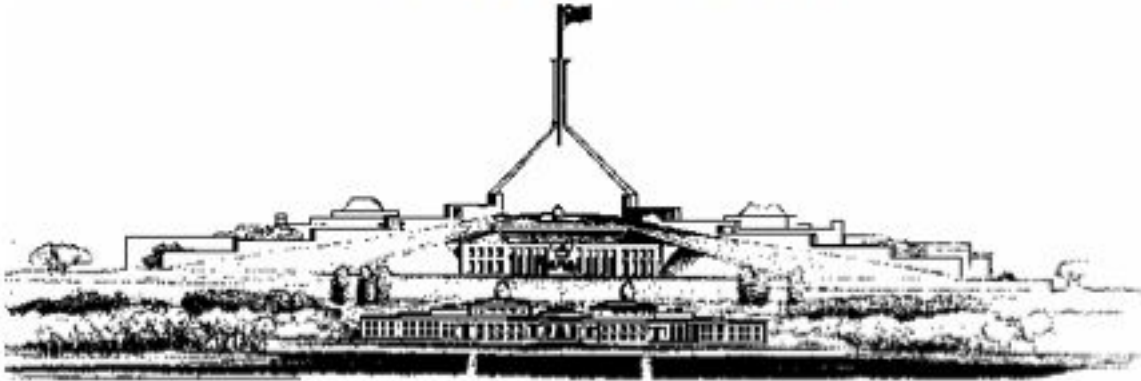




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**  
**ADJOURNMENT**

**Citizenship**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 13 September 2007**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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**Senator BOYCE** (Queensland) (7.06 pm)—The topic of citizenship was high on the Senate's agenda earlier this week and I would like to highlight a number of anniversaries and observances about to occur that are related to citizenship in Australia. Within the space of 11 days this month Australian citizens will mark an interesting series of events. These events, I believe, say a lot about our country and about our undoubted success as a country primarily of immigrants. They include: the sixth anniversary of the attacks in New York and Washington, which occurred on Tuesday this week; today, which is the beginning of the Muslim month of fasting, Ramadan; next Monday, which marks Australian Citizenship Day; and the following week, which has the Jewish Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, beginning at sunset on 21 September.

Today we see the start of Ramadan, an important time in the calendar for a great number of Australian citizens. I would like to extend to the Muslims of Australia best wishes for this month of fasting, a ritual that many of the 340,000 Muslims around this country will undertake over the next 30 days. During Ramadan Muslims will not partake of food or drink from sunrise to sunset and they will engage in extra prayers. The month of Ramadan marks the revelation of the Koran, the holy book of Islam, about 1,400 years ago.

The Muslims have been in Australia for more than 200 years, with some historians suggesting they were here before the First Fleet, with Macassan Muslims trading with Indigenous groups across Northern Australia. Since this time, Muslims have come from many different lands to make a contribution across many different areas in the development of Australia. We all know of the Afghani camel drivers who helped open up inland Australia, building the Overland Telegraph Line and the railways. There were Bosnian workers on the Snowy Mountains scheme and, in North Queensland, Muslims were pioneers of the sugarcane and tobacco industries. Their stories are sometimes overlooked but their contributions should never be forgotten.

Today, almost 40 per cent of Australian Muslims were born right here in Australia. And whether they are 'new' or 'old' Australians we see Muslim success at the highest level of business and sport, with people

like John Ilhan, the owner of Crazy John's phone company; Ahmed Fahour, the CEO of the National Australia Bank; Hazem El Masri, the great point-scoring rugby league player from the Canterbury Bulldogs; and Bachar Houli, the first Muslim playing in the AFL, for Essendon.

The Muslims are among our professors, surgeons, teachers, bakers and scientists. According to a Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs report released just last month, Muslims have an above-average proportion of postgraduate degrees compared with the rest of the Australian population, and one of the most common languages spoken in Australian Muslim homes is English. In Queensland, my home state, English is the most common language spoken in Muslim homes. In business, the halal meat industry contributes \$5 billion annually to the Australian economy and employs more than 30,000 people.

All of Australia has had the opportunity to learn a little about Islam over the past six months with the Family and Community Services program Sharing our Achievements. Sharing our Achievements was a whole-of-government initiative that originally came out of the Prime Minister's Muslim Reference Group established for the purpose of explaining to wider Australia the successes and contributions of Muslim people. Sharing our Achievements has now produced a report that showcases Australian Muslims in each state and their contributions to our country. FaCSIA has reported that the program was a great success with many thousands of non-Muslim Australians learning what their fellow Muslim countrymen and women have contributed over the past 200-plus years.

To the Jewish people of Australia I also offer my good wishes as they observe the holy day of Yom Kippur next week. From sunset on Friday, 21 September, to sunset on Saturday, 22 September, Jews around the world will fast. This day is considered one of the holiest days of the Jewish calendar. As you can see, this country was built by people from many different countries and religions, and next Monday when we celebrate Citizenship Day we should recognise and give thanks not just for the diversity, prosperity and richness these many cultures have brought to this country but also for the vibrancy and the tolerance of our nation.

I was privileged to officiate at my first citizenship ceremony as a senator for Queensland a few weeks back in Brisbane. This ceremony was hosted by the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland. The Ethnic Communities Council is the peak body of the multicultural community in Queensland and members of the council have contributed a great deal to the harmonious relations between the different cultures in Queensland. Stalwarts of the ECCQ include Nick Xynias, the honorary president, and the chairman, Serge Voloschenko. We are very proud of our community leaders in Queensland, and people like Nick and Serge, along with Eddie Liu, the ‘Father of Chinatown’, the Deen family, including Ray and Sultan, who have helped build most of the mosques in Brisbane, are the types of leaders that any community would be proud of—hard-working, committed and passionate about this country—and all have a background from outside Australia. They are the people that Citizenship Day is designed to remind us about.

At the Citizenship Ceremony in Brisbane I stood and looked at the variety of people that were undertaking their pledge to be loyal citizens and to respect the rights and liberties of this country. They came from 12 different countries and the oldest of them was 78. They came from Malaysia, Burma, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Germany and the UK, to name a few. I was deeply impressed by the strength and commitment these people had in pledging allegiance to a totally new country away from the country of their birth, their culture and their heritage.

For those who make a conscious decision to come to this country and then make a conscious decision to become a citizen, it must be a very special feeling—the feeling of deciding to really belong; to see your family prosper in this country; to see future generations take full advantage of what this country offers. It is a reminder for those of us born here not to take the rights and privileges of citizenship for granted. There are around one million eligible people in this country who have yet to take up citizenship and more than half of them come from the UK and New Zealand.

The dictionary meaning of ‘citizenship’ is the status of a citizen with its attendant duties, rights and privileges—and it is a privilege. To gain citizenship of a country means that you have made a conscious decision to be a connected, contributing member of the society, to enjoy the advantages of what being a citizen means and to participate in the future direction of the country.

As a citizen of Australia you are entitled to vote—a fundamental principle, and a democratic freedom that is still being fought for today, in the 21st century, by the peoples of a number of countries. This is something that we tend not to remember often enough. Voting gives you the opportunity to have your say in the government you want, on how you

want to shape the future of the country, and to fully participate in the political direction of this country. Australia has a strong and favourable reputation in the world, and having a passport is one of the privileges of Australian citizenship. You can also stand for parliament, and I would like to point out that in the Senate right now we have senators from eight different national backgrounds, including the UK, New Zealand, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malaysia and Belgium.

My message to those considering becoming Australian citizens is this: do it for the right reasons. Do it because you put Australia’s interests first and you want to see a vibrant, diverse and tolerant nation, with the wonderful strength that this brings us in these times of international divisiveness and sometimes fear.