

A Barrier or Bridge? Serious problems revealed in the UK citizenship test

By Democratic Audit

Thom Brooks has examined the UK citizenship test and finds that it is highly irrelevant to living in this society, has many inconsistencies, and suffers from serious gender imbalance. To make matters worse, changes to the test this year have transformed it from being a practical trivia quiz to being purely trivial. Greater care needs to be taken to ensure balance and consistency, and it is worth reconsidering the purpose of the test.

The *Life in the United Kingdom* citizenship test has become an integral part of British immigration policy. One million tests have been taken since its launch in 2005. About 150,000 people sat the test last year. Passing the test is a requirement for permanent residency and citizenship. Alternatively, a short course, English for Speakers of Other Languages with Citizenship, may be completed although this can take much longer and is more expensive. The *Life in the UK* test takes 45 minutes and it has 24 questions. Applicants must answer 18 or more correctly to pass.



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I published the only comprehensive [report](#) into the test and its uses for immigration policy in June. The report launch was held in Durham Castle and [uploaded on YouTube](#). My findings were covered in over 275 newspapers and media outlets across the UK and internationally, including Comedy Central and Mock the Week. However, my report was no laughing matter for the government as I revealed the test to be impractical, inconsistent and contain significant gender imbalance rendering it 'unfit for purpose' and like '[a bad pub quiz](#)'.

The *Life in the UK* test has always included what many of us might consider trivia. Information such as the number of MPs in the House of Commons or how to claim a National Insurance number is not probably known by most British citizens. But the test has gone from a test about practical trivia to the purely trivial. Information about how to contact an ambulance, how to report a crime or how to register with a GP has been removed. Instead, applicants are required to know the year that the Emperor Claudius invaded Britain, the approximate age of Big Ben's clock and the height of the London Eye in feet and meters. Consider the following dates in the life of Sake Dean Mahomet that must be memorized by rote: birth (1759), first came to the UK (1782), eloped to Ireland (1786), opened first curry house (1810) and death (1851). Furthermore, it must be known that he married a woman from Ireland named Jane Daly, that his curry house was called the Hindooostane Coffee House and it was established on George Street in London. The test has never included so much impractical information before – and the new handbook has about 3,000 facts to be memorized. And remember: only 24 will be covered on the test.

Curiously for a handbook written and approved by politicians, the number of MPs has always been a bit of a problem. The first edition was published in late 2004 and stated there were 645 MPs. This was untrue: there were 646. So why this mistake? The best explanation I found for this was that only 645 constituencies were contested in the 2005 General Election. This was because a candidate in the 646th constituency – Staffordshire South – had died and so that election was postponed. But there were still 646 (and not 645) MPs. In 2007, the second edition of the test handbook was published. This time the government confirmed the correct number of 646. However, this soon changed to 650 MPs and this change was never incorporated on the test. It was the case – when I sat the test in 2009 – that the ‘correct’ answer to this and many other questions were factually untrue.

The new handbook published this year has solved this problem through omission. Applicants are no longer required to know how many MPs sit in Westminster. Many of us might think this a welcome change: after all, if MPs have been confused about this, why expect the British public to do any better? And why should this information be a requirement for citizenship anyway? Nevertheless, all applicants are still required to know the number of elected representatives in the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly.

The inconsistencies do not end there. Various courts from youth courts and beyond are mentioned, but the UK Supreme Court is left out. Another inconsistency concerns telephone numbers. It may be hard to believe, but the new test handbook requires applicants to memorize telephone numbers. There are five to know and none are 999 or 111. The five include the National Domestic Violence Helpline and the HMRC self-assessment helpline. The final three are the front offices of the House of Commons, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament – omitting (forgetting?) the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont in Belfast.

The *Life in the UK* test suffers from serious gender imbalance. For example, the new test includes a substantial chapter about British history. This chapter lists the dates of birth for about 30 men, but only four women. Neither of the Queen’s birthdays is included. No women artists are mentioned: we are required to know Damien Hirst won the Turner Prize, but not Tracey Emin. No women musicians or singers are noted. No women poets have any lines for memorizing among the several scattered throughout the handbook. No women are included in a long list of famous scientists and inventors. Nor are these the only strange omissions: L. S. Lowry is left out and there are no lines included by Robert Burns.

Nor does this gender imbalance appear to be a simple oversight. A Home Office announcement on the day the new test launched commented on how the test now includes a chapter about British history. The Home Office [announcement](#) states the importance for immigrants to know the achievements of the people who have shaped Britain – naming 9 men and no women.

My report provides 12 recommendations for how the test can be reformed and avoid these problems in future. These include the need for greater care to be taken to ensure greater balance and consistency. I also recommend the need for a public consultation. This is now long overdue. There has been no such consultation since the test was launched in 2005. The test has now undergone three editions with one million tests sat. It is high time some effort was made to re-examine whether the test has lived up to its promise and how it might be further improved. Any such consultation must include engagement with people like me – immigrants to Britain who have sat the test. It is shocking that no public effort has made to consult with those who have sat the test and become British citizens. Many of the mistakes we can find in the test might have been avoided if ministers had experienced immigration first-hand and sat similar tests.

Finally, it is worth reconsidering the purpose of the test. One model is a barrier where the test serves as an obstacle to citizenship. A second model is a bridge where it is more of a formality confirming common membership. Should the test be a barrier or a bridge? For the moment, it is neither fish nor fowl or platypus. To best reform the test, we must ask what purpose we want it to serve. I believe a sensible discussion about this is possible and the positive, widespread coverage of my report gives me hope for the future. If we wait any longer, the test’s problems will only exacerbate. The time to act is now.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit, the British Politics and Policy blog ([on which it originally appeared](#)), nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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Thom Brooks is Reader in Law at Durham Law School arriving in 2012. He is an Associate in Philosophy with links to research centres in law, government and philosophy, including Centre for Criminal Law and Criminal Justice, Centre for Ethics, Law and Life Sciences, Centre for the History of Political Thought, Gender and Law at Durham, Human Rights Centre and the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research. Brooks has held visiting appointments at St John's College, Oxford; St Andrews and Uppsala and he taught previously at Newcastle. He is an Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences, Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. Brooks is the founding editor of the *Journal of Moral Philosophy*.

