

What Are Australian Values, Really?

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The debate about Australian values, culture and citizenship keeps simmering along and shows no sign of going away any time soon. Martin Leet examines the hypocrisy that characterises the debate and argues that it distracts attention from the real issues.



What are Australian values, really?

The federal government has released a discussion paper, entitled *Australian Citizenship: Much more than a ceremony*. The paper is correct in its contention that citizenship is 'much more than a ceremony'; but not for the reasons advanced in the paper itself or by its promoters.

Andrew Robb, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, says that the discussion paper is meant to promote debate in a situation where citizenship has become simply a passport in the eyes of many immigrants. He argues that citizenship is not a right but a privilege, and that it will not be valued if we 'give it away like confetti'.

The paper claims that to make newcomers better appreciate the value of citizenship, more needs to be done by applicants to obtain it. Thus, the paper proposes, among other things, the introduction of a formal citizenship test that would examine English language proficiency, and knowledge of and commitment to Australian values.

It seems likely that the test will be introduced. The suggestion has been met with bipartisan support. And a Newspoll survey indicates that the Australian population is also sympathetic, with 77 per cent of respondents agreeing with the idea. The discussion paper refers to the UK, the USA, Canada and the Netherlands as providing useful examples that could be followed.

In themselves, the proposals seem elementary. They would formalise a common sense expectation that applicants for citizenship should make some effort to learn the national language and to understand something of the society and culture of which they want to become a part. There is, however, a context in which this discussion paper has emerged, a context that should make us question the motivations and priorities behind the idea of introducing a citizenship test.

Throughout the term of his government, the Prime Minister has argued repeatedly that too much emphasis has been placed on the values of multiculturalism and diversity. He insists that we need to concentrate more on social cohesion. And the threat to cohesion and unity, in his view, comes not only from immigrants unwilling to assimilate, but also from critics of Australian culture and history who are transmitting their cynicism via the education system.

The prominence of this nationalist theme in the Prime Minister's rhetoric is a distraction from the real threats to Australian values, meaningful citizenship and a cohesive society. Values have no meaning unless they are expressed in the routine operation of institutions and in everyday social and economic practices. The practical glue holding together any nation is to be found in such institutions and practices, not in values articulated merely as beliefs.

In Australia, the institutions and practices that once expressed our 'traditional' values have changed a great deal over the last three decades. They now articulate a quite different set of values and meanings. Consider the values that Andrew Robb correctly refers to as having enabled us to be a successful multicultural country: 'our respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, support for democracy, our commitment to the rule of law, the equality of men and women, the spirit of the fair go, of mutual respect and compassion for those in need'. Each of these values has always been imperfectly realised, but their hold in the daily life of Australians is becoming more and more tenuous.

The first and third values are elementary features of a liberal democracy. In recent years, they have become victims of 'the war on terror'. The cases of Cornelia Rau and Vivian Alvarez demonstrate that even existing Australian citizens cannot be guaranteed freedom and dignity in their treatment by government. For potential newcomers, the 'citizenship lesson' they are being taught at numerous detention camps around the nation and offshore is hardly one that can engender respect for Australia's liberal democratic credentials. Meanwhile, other security measures such as control orders and laws on sedition are compromising the basic principles of the rule of law and established liberal freedoms.

'Support for democracy' as an Australian value also seems to be fading away, particularly at the behest of governments. With control of both houses of parliament, the federal Coalition has made significant changes to the Commonwealth Electoral Act. Norm Kelly has argued that these changes, including disenfranchisement of all prisoners and an increase in the donation disclosure threshold, are a threat to our democratic values. The Coalition has also implemented modifications that restrict the role of the parliamentary committee system, one of the few areas in which there is an opportunity for genuine debate, transparency and input from the community.

Political parties themselves have become less and less representative as a result of shrinking memberships and the control of policy by small groups of heavyweights. The mainstream media's presentation of issues is generally simplistic and emphasises far too much the personal and partisan dimensions of debate. And it appears likely that, with new legislation, the concentration of media ownership will increase. Citizens are left with fewer avenues to express their democratic rights and contribute to meaningful discussions. It can be little surprise that voter turnout is decreasing and informal voting is increasing, as indicated in the recent Queensland election.

The other values Robb mentions - the equality of men and women, the spirit of the fair go, of mutual respect and compassion for those in need - all depend heavily on the organisation of economy and society. A casual look at the way economic life has been 'modernised' and 'reformed' since the 1980s demonstrates that these values are also part of a past rather than current Australian culture, as they become less and less central to policy formulation.

The spirit of the fair go was once institutionalised in the arbitration system which provided a means for ensuring that a variety of decisions in workplaces took regard of the interests and livelihood of wage earners. The deregulation of the industrial relations system, culminating in the *WorkChoices* legislation, has steadily silenced the voices of employees and their representatives. While the centralised system had its faults, the current approach undermines a sense of partnership between employees and employers. It means that the needs and interests of firms can always take priority while workers are to be treated as simply another 'factor of production'. Wages can now be determined on the basis of capacity to pay rather than the needs of employees and their families; wages across the economy, even for similar jobs, are open to far more variation; and the decisions by companies to organise work, to restructure or to relocate are less open to challenge by employees or unions. Given that firms in a variety of sectors face mounting pressure to relocate part or all of their operations to countries such as China and India, the structure of the economy will be determined less and less by the interests of citizens.

The 'fair go' was also once expressed in the Australian dream of owning one's own home. This dream has become increasingly unrealistic, once again as the result of policy rather than due to some kind of unavoidable fate. Scope for negative gearing and capital gains tax provisions have made housing subject to speculative investment. These factors have inflated house prices artificially such that the market has become unaffordable for many citizens wanting to buy a dwelling, even for those on middle incomes in some areas. A knock-on effect has been that the rental market has also 'boomed', so that rents are eating up larger and larger portions of household budgets. Policy has further exacerbated the problems since there has been a shift away from providing housing assistance via public housing to reliance on the private rental market. A report released by the Tenants Union of Victoria in September analysed these and other

developments in the rental sector, concluding that 'locating affordable housing in the private rental markets of Australia's capital cities is extremely difficult, and in some cases impossible, for low-income Australian households'.

'Mutual respect' and 'compassion for those in need' are hardly the motives behind the welfare to work legislation that came into effect in July. The ostensible aims of the provisions are desirable, to increase participation in the labour force and reduce welfare dependency. However, these aims can be achieved in a variety of ways. The current approach reflects a shallow understanding of human motivations, for its incentives are punitive and monetary: people are more or less forced into the labour market through the withdrawal of welfare benefits. The legislation was revised before its introduction to parliament in light of research showing that many disadvantaged people, particularly sole parents, would be treated too harshly and even be worse off as a result of moving from welfare to work. Even in its revised form, the policy has been criticised both within and from outside the Coalition.

The 'equality of men and women' can be regarded as another traditional value given that Australia was one of the first countries to introduce female suffrage. A key contemporary challenge regarding equality between the sexes has involved significant changes to family life and the increased participation of women in the workforce. 'Balancing work and family' has become a central topic. This balancing act is indeed difficult, with research consistently showing that women, even when involved as much as their male partner in the workforce, are still burdened with a disproportionate share of the unpaid caring and domestic labour. This inequality can be explained partly as a cultural hangover of the 'male breadwinner/female homemaker' model of family and work life. Once again, though, policy is obstructive. The deregulated industrial relations system and the welfare to work measures privilege work over family.

Work is privileged over family and social life in a general way, as material wealth has increasingly become our measure of self-worth. Presumably we once aimed to become rich in order to have more relaxation and free time, but our model of success and growth makes time more rather than less pressured. In his book, *The Challenge of Affluence*, economic historian Professor Avner Offer notes that as once luxurious desires have been transformed into essential needs, especially in the Anglo Saxon world, citizens have become victims of a 'hedonic treadmill' where work intrudes further into family life in an attempt to gratify insatiable consumer demands. Extravagance and showiness have replaced a more modest and sustainable lifestyle, with household debt nearly three times higher than it was ten years ago. A culture of winners and losers has emerged, compared to an erstwhile sense of egalitarianism.

Governments are quite happy to promote this frenzied lifestyle because it makes aggregate economic figures look good, while tax revenues increase along with the number of economic transactions. But neither the lifestyle

nor the economic structure it is associated with is sustainable. The breakdowns in family and social life leading from time scarcity along with environmental degradation create costs that must eventually outweigh higher incomes.

The higher incomes themselves are unlikely to continue given that our economy has not matured beyond being a 'banana republic': our trade deficit is up by around 140 per cent over the last ten years. A report by the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research in July noted that while manufacturing added value in GDP in 1979-80 was just under 20 per cent, it was a little above 12 per cent by 2004-5. The mining boom has camouflaged this poor performance and, as the report states, 'To completely configure the economy to suit the needs of an industry that employs only 1.3 per cent of the Australian workforce is incredibly shortsighted'. Meanwhile, the preference of governments to show-off budget surpluses rather than invest in collective infrastructure will create enormous impediments in economy and society in the medium- to long-term. We have, in short, become more rather than less vulnerable in these times of 'prosperity'.

Such issues and problems are worrying but they are not discussed in a way that promotes alternative policy approaches. Instead, the federal government as well as the opposition, despite their agreement on the fundamentals, argue over minor details of a citizenship test to provide an illusory justification for feelings of anxiety and concern. The government, in particular, has profitably captured the imagination of many voters with the idea that Australian culture is withering because of the seditious beliefs of outsiders and radical, postmodern insiders. Yet, as one of its own, backbencher Petro Georgiou, has noted, the citizenship proposals are a solution in search of a problem. The government has provided, in his words, 'no detailed, robust analysis of a problem, and no evidence of how the new measures would resolve a problem that has not been demonstrated'.

Both John Howard and Kim Beazley have been lecturing Australians on values as though we are a football team going out to play a grand final. We are being roused into action, to launch ourselves better on the world stage and come out winners in the global economic race. Being united helps when you're a team competing with others, and values are a good psychological trick for getting everyone to put in and cooperate. Yet, as mere beliefs, values are not a unifying force for a nation; indeed, as slogans, they work more to divide than bring together.

The focus upon values and citizenship covers up the much more disturbing threat to national cohesion and a civil society: policy that seeks deliberately to abandon traditional values and replace them with practices of excessive market competition and dwindling collective provision. The blatant contradiction between policy and rhetoric is no more obvious than in the federal government's cut in funding to English language programs at

the same time as it complains of the English language proficiency of potential citizens.

One of the original meanings of the word 'culture' referred to the cultivation of human beings out of human animals. Culture, in this sense, involves ideas and values that educate the individual to defer impulses for immediate gratification or premature judgement so as to consider the needs of others and reflect upon life rather than stumble through it half asleep. The traditional Australian values our political leaders have been lecturing us on hark back to this meaning of culture. Values such as fairness, tolerance, mateship, egalitarianism, hard work and self-reliance paint a picture of a community and economy in which progress is achieved in an inclusive, balanced and sustainable way.

In contrast with these values, contemporary policy promotes the human animal rather than the human being. Citizens are whipped up into a stampede of materialism and consumerism where each person has to trample upon many others to get ahead and has little time to consider what they are doing. If we expect immigrants to understand the Australian way of life as a condition of citizenship, perhaps we should forget about the traditional stories and be more up front about how it really is.

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