7. 'Team Australia':

reviewing Australian nationalism

Commentary: This essay reviews different notions about and approaches to nationalism in Australia in the year 2014 as seen through media commentary generated by the incumbent conservative Coalition government's declaration of new anti-terror initiatives (September-October 2014) and Prime Minister Tony Abbott's use of the metaphor 'Team Australia'. The aim is to shed light on divergent understandings of the place of nationalism in contemporary Australian politics and society. Nationalism can be both a means of engendering electoral and political affiliation and a more diffuse sentiment that pervades broader community ties in ways that go beyond mediated mobilisation. Multiculturalism as a trope, construct and category of political analysis serves as a useful context within which competing claims of national identity and nationalism may be examined. Multiculturalism is a well-embedded notion in Australia. However, continuing conflicts and international events constantly re-inflect understandings of nationalism and national unity against the backdrop of Australian multiculturalism. This essay surveys approaches to Abbott's declarations and poses queries for future research on discourse and nationalism in Australia.

Keynotes: discourse analysis, diversity, multiculturalism, nationalism, national identity, politics, terrorism

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GAINST the backdrop of the burgeoning crisis in the Middle East that was precipitated by the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), domestic policy in Australia, as in much of Europe and the United States, became a site of critical contestations and challenges during 2014. The much-discussed phenomenon of the involvement of 'foreign fighters' in the conflict (estimates vary but in November 2014, US intelligence sources placed the number of ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria with American, European and Australian citizenship at 2000, from among 15,000 foreign fighters overall), and the concomitant questions it raised about radicalisation and national security, prompted considerable debate and politico-legal manoeuvring in Western societies. The impact of the conflict in Western nations was amplified by a range of factors. Other than

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the seemingly intractable problem of radicalised individuals traveling to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS cadres on the ground, there was of course the politically more significant question of the US' assumption of a leading role in the military campaign against the organisation and the enormous financial and strategic commitments underpinning it.

However, no aspect of the conflict affected public sentiment as visibly and dramatically as the succession of beheadings of Western hostages carried out by ISIS from August to November 2014 and broadcast by the group via social media (Hjelmgaard, 2014). (Other than an unknown number of Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi soldiers, most likely in the hundreds, ISIS is known to have beheaded six Western hostages, who were captured while working in Syria as journalists or aid workers.) As images of these 'propaganda videos' filled mainstream media outlets, one of many discussions that dominated public discourse pertained to the implications for national security of the involvement of Western nationals and citizens in the burgeoning terror regime in Iraq and Syria, and the repercussions the return of said nationals would have in their home societies. In fact, discussion of the latter problem served as a precursor to a series of law-enforcement mobilisations and political debates about so-called 'home-grown terrorists'. Thus, amidst inevitable dissonance, the question of national security intersected with questions about citizenship, national loyalty and identity. It is in the light of these developments that a critical moment of political and discoursal contestation arose in Australia over the meaning(s) that may properly be ascribed to Australian national identity.

On 18 August 2014, ahead of a meeting with leaders of Muslim religious organisations in Australia, Prime Minister Tony Abbott expressed concern about the Australians among ISIS foreign fighters returning home:

Some of them will want to come back to Australia and they do pose a risk if they do, because they've been radicalised, militarised and brutalised by the experience... So we do have to be vigilant against it, and my position is that everyone has got to be on Team Australia. (News, 2014)

He averred that in his forthcoming meeting with Muslim religious and community leaders he would emphasise the importance of an unequivocal commitment to Australian values:

Everyone has got to put this country, its interests, its values and its people first, and you don't migrate to this country unless you want to join our team and that's the point I'll be stressing. (ibid.)

Abbott's assertion that every migrant who comes to Australia should abandon other (conflicting) political loyalties and become part of 'Team Australia' prompted considerable debate in the form of a series of engagements with the latter construct that were published in mainstream and alternative media. In this essay, I review some of these opinion pieces

and present a few instances of how nationalism and patriotism were conceptualised by a cohort of commentators vis-à-vis their respective positions on Abbott's nationalist propositions. For this, I refer to *The Conversation* (8), *The Drum* (5), *New Matilda* (1) and Crikev (2). I chose my readings primarily from among the aforementioned online media platforms (which prioritise the views of academics, commentators and public intellectuals) to the exclusion of mainstream media outlets so as to leave the political leanings of mainstream outlets out of the equation (Henningham, 1995). This is not to foist expectations of neutrality on the former online publications but to use them to gauge the views of unaffiliated 'media intellectuals' (see Jacobs & Townsley, 2011). Half of the articles read (8 out of 16) do not address Abbott's comments directly at all; instead, in addressing other political or social issues, they refer to his invocation of 'Team Australia' only tangentially. However, these references nevertheless indicate particular attitudes or sentiments that serve to illuminate the original topic. Further, while it is true that the phrase originally emerged from a context of domestic security and counter-terrorism policy, it soon came to encompass a wide variety of meanings as seen, for instance, in Abbott's later use of the same phrase at a business summit (Trembath, 2014). I conclude with queries for future research on discourse and Australian nationalism.

Framing

In terms of framing, all the articles read from the aforementioned sources frame 'Team Australia' negatively. Broadly, Abbott's call to national loyalty was deemed confusing and divisive. In spite of its overtly inclusive content—insofar as it exhorted a commitment by all migrants to 'Team Australia', a metonym for the country and broader society—the pronouncement and, more importantly, the context in which it emerged cast doubt on the sincerity of the inclusiveness implied. Comments made by Australian Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane capture the sense of confusion pervading certain readings of Abbott's usage of the phrase. Asking what the term 'Team Australia' meant, he argued:

If 'Team Australia' is simply shorthand for an Australian liberal democratic community, for a community of equal citizens, I don't think any of us would have an issue with it. Signing up to this is already part of the contract of multicultural citizenship. All of us are already signed up. We are all proud to be Australians.

But if 'Team Australia' is meant to suggest something else, we are entitled to ask for an explanation. Manufacturing patriotism can sometimes do more to divide than to unite. Genuine civic pride comes from within; it is not something that others can command us to display. (Grattan, 2014a)

Soutphommasane's criticism focused on the putative implications of the phrase and the manner in which it was assumed that some migrants lacked a commitment to 'a liberal democratic community ... a community of equal citizens' (ibid.). His opposition to the

phrase was predicated on his belief that the 'contract of multicultural citizenship' enjoined on all migrants a binding commitment to Australian democratic values and that questioning this commitment amounted to excluding them from 'the family of the nation' (ibid.). Soutphommasane also criticised the Abbott government's approach to the controversial debate around proposed amendments to Sec. 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act and linked this to the former question in terms of how Muslim Australians were implicated in both. The crux of his antagonism to Abbott's exhortation was thus its implied criticism of Muslim communities in Australia and the perceived resistance within quarters of the community to an unequivocal commitment to Australian values over secularism and liberal democracy. This was also the antagonism that prompted the Islamic Council of Victoria to cancel a scheduled meeting with the prime minister after he had made his comments (ABC, 2014).

Where it was not seen as confusing, it was deemed deliberately provocative. In his critique of what he suggests are the Abbott's government's 'surprising' attempts (in spite of ongoing opposition) to 'transform Australian political culture', political scholar Dominic Kelly (2014) locates Abbott's pronouncements on 'Team Australia' alongside other contemporary decisions and events that, he believes, have been designed to 'take the focus off [the government's] unpopular budget policies with misguided "culture war" tactics, showing all of the hardline ideology but none of the political savvy of John Howard at his most effective'. Abbott's nationalism is projected as a diversionary tactic. Writing in *New Matilda*, scholar Jeff Sparrow (2014) argues that politicians have tended to exaggerate the threat posed by the Islamic State and have consequently contributed to an atmosphere of 'fear and loathing' in Australia. 'Team Australia' was thus implicated as a discursive tool in the 'culture wars' and in the creation of a febrile atmosphere of fear and terror.

In an article titled 'Dead Poets Society meets Team Australia under Captain Abbott', scholar of culture and sport David Rowe suggests that Abbott is 'uncommonly fond of sport metaphors, not least when addressing the domestic terror threat' (Rowe, 2014). He suggests that Abbott's 'championing of Team Australia ... symbolically turns Australia into a giant dressing room and stadium' (ibid.). Rowe turns to formulations by historian Eric Hobsbawm and novelist George Orwell to illuminate the interconnections between sports, team metaphors, nationalism and war. In commentaries on emergent challenges in Australia's foreign policy vis-à-vis America's increased involvement in Iraq and Syria in the mobilisation against the Islamic State and Australia's commitment of resources to the same (Lockyer, 2014; Wright, 2014), Rowe's version of Abbott's perceived machismo is juxtaposed against the ribald, trigger-happy militarism of the US that is satirically depicted in the animated action-comedy film *Team America: World Police* (2004); thus are machismo, militarism and the comic potential of sporting metaphors yoked together.

'Team Australia' also emerged as a point of reference in a range of other discussions and commentaries. Working as an all-encompassing metonym for the nation in general,

and the government in particular, the phrase was deployed in a range of opinion pieces on domestic and international issues, from the Ebola crisis in West Africa (Grattan, 2014b; Kamradt-Scott, 2014) to economic inequality in Australia (Blutstein, 2014; Green, 2014a; Green, 2014b; Lewis & Woods, 2014), the Australian citizenship test (Chisari, 2014) and telecommunications surveillance (Green, 2014c). While these opinion pieces do not address Abbott's remarks (or even the context in which they were made) directly, they illuminate attitudes to nationalism indirectly by framing 'Team Australia' as a flawed and ineffective construct. In each of these articles the phrase 'Team Australia' is included, or referred to, in the main text and not only, if at all, in the headline. As such, the use is attributable to the author, and not the editor or sub-editor.

In opinion pieces on the then-unfolding Ebola crisis such as 'Time for Team Australia to do more for Ebola' (Grattan, 2014b) and 'Gung-ho on terror, Australia is missing in action against Ebola' (Kamradt-Scott, 2014), the authors use the metaphor pejoratively to criticise the government for its reluctance to make a more substantial commitment to the global mobilisation against Ebola. A similar inflection is seen in an essay evaluating the performance and perceived effectiveness of the Australian citizenship test (Chisari, 2014). Essays on economic inequality in Australia are particularly trenchant in their criticism of the government's invocation of a cohesive and all-encompassing political identity. Critiques of inequality cite widespread and continually expanding economic divisions in society to argue that claims of a cohesive and inclusive political identity are inaccurate and misleading (Blutstein, 2014; Green, 2014a; Green, 2014b; Lewis & Woods, 2014; Summers, 2014).

Arguing that the apparent seamlessness of 'Team Australia' is belied by its inherent socio-economic contradictions, journalist Jonathan Green (2014a) writes: 'The Prime Minister's concept of Team Australia seems so simple: the Australian way, you're for it or you're against it. The Australian reality though? Well, that's a more complex thing altogether.' Green (2014b) asserts that we should be cognisant of the potential for social conflict that is immanent in a society teeming with 'masses of underemployed youth who are left in Team Australia's dust'. Discussing public perceptions of class divisions in society, communication strategists and pollsters Peter Lewis and Jackie Woods write:

Tony Abbott's 'Team Australia' is designed to unite us. But the risk is Australians will see it more like the humiliation of primary school PE, with a captain who overlooks the average kids and blatantly favours the jocks. (2014)

Class divisions and economic inequality are thus posited as a critical impediment to political cohesion, and the unity implied in Abbott's metaphor is dismissed as notional. Another article by Green (2014c) uses the metaphor to highlight a perceived pre-empting of opposition to legislative proposals. In an article on the suite of anti-terror laws passed by the Australian Parliament in September-October 2014, and specifically on

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the controversial provisions for increased telecommunications surveillance included therein, Green writes:

As they say: 'There's no jihad in team'... Team Australia that is. Or is that Operation Team Australia? Whichever, we're all in this together now, armed only with sprigs of wattle and the nation's internet browsing history against 'unhealthy immigrant values' and the chilling possibility of mass-casualty homeland terror. (2014c)

Here, Green sees the exhortation to political unity ('dutiful members of Team Australia') as a strategy to whittle down opposition and dissent.

On the basis of this review of the selected corpus of articles published in online and alternative media sites, it may be argued that Abbott's pronouncements on 'Team Australia' provoked considerable discomfort and consternation (manifesting as opposition to the term) among media commentators. Having delineated the ways in which this was expressed, the next two segments of this review: 1) provide a context for Australian nationalism, and 2) pose queries for future research on how nationalism and national unity could potentially be rearticulated.

Australian nationalism

Charting a genealogy of Australian nationalism(s), political scholar Shaun Crowe (2014) argues that Abbott's nationalism is 'framed in terms of external threats' and is thus an extension of Howard-era political mobilisations around the 'War on Terror'. He believes that this return to a nationalism 'defined in opposition to a military threat' was indicative of the Abbott government's 'pivot from domestic to foreign policy' (ibid.). By putting 'the question of national loyalty back at the centre of politics', Abbott was drawing on a historical legacy spanning various epochs (ibid.). While nationalism in the early 20th century was primarily associated with the politics of the left and emphasised cultural independence and egalitarianism (as also Australian isolation and the primacy of white settler culture)—as a counterpoint to identification with Britain—during World War I, nationalism was 'defined as unquestioning loyalty to a country under military threat' (ibid.). Opponents of conscription under the William Hughes government were accused variously of being German sympathisers, Irish republicans and industrial revolutionaries. During the Cold War, under Robert Menzies, Communism was the perceived enemy and patriotism was defined by a 'commitment to liberal capitalism' (ibid.). Newspapers such as The Sydney Morning Herald and leaders such as Harold Holt accused politicians like Labor leader H. V. Evatt of defending Communism and thus betraying the nation. In the 1960s and 70s, with Britain's departure from Asia and its integration into the European Economic Community, a 'new nationalism' emerged in Australia that stood for, in Gough Whitlam's words, 'self-confidence, maturity, originality and independence of mind' (ibid.)—in other words, a return to cultural nationalism. Crowe argues that the

nationalism of the 21st century, under Liberal Prime Minister John Howard and now Abbott, shaped predominantly by the vagaries of global anti-terror mobilisations, corresponds more closely to that of the World Wars and the 1950s.

Queries for future research

In the contemporary context, nationalism and national identity in Western societies are highly contested conceptions (Dogan, 1994; Billig, 1995). Both academia and the public sphere are characterised by intersecting and divergent claims of what constitutes a legitimate context for articulating exhortations to national unity. In many quarters, nationalism has been assailed as 'banal' and as an anachronistic historical phenomenon (Billig, 1995). This is countervailed by the continuing insertion of nationalistic discourse into the public sphere, where it remains a valid and sometimes potent tool of political mobilisation. In Western societies, the ideological gap between those who espouse a resurgence of nationalism and those who abhor it is significant (Soutphommasane, 2009). This is in marked contrast to several 'non-western' nations where nationalism (in its contemporary manifestations) either remains or has recently become a commonly-deployed means of forging political identity and a staple of media discourse.

This essay has reviewed different approaches to nationalism as seen through media commentary prompted by the incumbent Coalition government's declaration of new anti-terror initiatives and Prime Minister Tony Abbott's use of the metaphor of 'Team Australia'. I argue that (both directly and indirectly) positions on the place of nationalism in contemporary Australian politics and society are embedded in the media commentary surveyed. Keeping in mind the necessary caveats about the context in which 'Team Australia' was deployed (and going beyond the particularities of this context as well as of the semiotics involved), my first query for future investigation is: in what ways could nationalism and claims of national unity potentially be rearticulated to forge a consensus around issues of political importance? Will national unity remain a valid and desirable tool of political mobilisation in the future?

Abbott's pronouncements were received overwhelmingly negatively in the online and alternative media sites surveyed. However, in other forums and spaces in the online public sphere, and of course in the mainstream media, the reception might have been very different. This leads me to ask: how are nationalism and claims of national unity articulated in different mediated spheres in Australia? What do the perceived differences between the contrasting articulations suggest about public discourse in Australia and the variegated nature of the political public sphere as a whole?

Nationalism can be both a means of engendering electoral and political affiliation and a more diffuse sentiment that pervades broader community ties in ways that go beyond mediated mobilisation. Multiculturalism as a trope, construct and category of political analysis serves as an accessible context within which competing claims of national identity and nationalism may be examined. It has been a clear policy programme in Australia

with its own federal office from the mid-1970s to 1996; as such it is a well-embedded notion in Australia. However, continuing conflicts and international events constantly re-inflect understandings of nationalism and national unity against the backdrop of Australian multiculturalism. Finally, it may be asked how future (and current) frameworks of nationalism will subsume multiculturalism and how the rubric of multiculturalism itself will incorporate claims of national unity in the future. I suggest the aforementioned areas of investigation will illuminate crucial features of the evolving media and political landscape in Australia.

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