

**Patriotism is dying.** By TANVEER AHMED, *The Australian*, 24 October 2014.

### **T-shirt debate shows progressives shun any display of patriotism**

“IT is a strange fact, but it is unquestionably true that almost any English intellectual would feel more ashamed of standing to attention during *God Save the King* than of stealing from a poor box.” So wrote George Orwell. His sentiments could scarcely be more applicable in modern Australia.

On patriotism, as with other national characteristics and policy strategies, Australia sits between individualist, nationalist America and collectivist, patriotically reluctant Europe.

Recent stormy debate over a T-shirt bearing an Australian flag and the slogan ‘Love it — or leave’ illustrates how difficult it is for Australian progressives to embrace outward displays of patriotism, lest they be stained by, or confused with, chest-beating hypermasculinity or perceived exclusion of minority groups.

Patriotism is a dirty word. Indeed, hip-hop artist Matt Colwell not only labelled the Australian flag “racist” on the ABC’s *Q&A*, he said later: “The way those people have used the flag has so tarnished the flag for me personally that it stands for a sort of swastika symbol in my mind.”

American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes in *The Righteous Mind* that conservatives have a broader matrix of moral worlds than progressives, who are skewed towards caring for the weak and distributing wealth. He compiled a catalogue of six fundamental ideas that commonly undergird moral systems: care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, authority and sanctity.

When psychologists talk about authority, loyalty and sanctity, those who identify with the Left spurn these ideas as the seeds of racism, sexism and homophobia.

Two world wars left a deep scar on the European psyche, especially on the notion of nationalism, which was seen as causing the rise of fascist Italy and Germany.

This ambivalence spawned a belief that countries such as Britain should be a culturally blank canvas; that patriotism is an old fashioned trapping of empire and countries such as Britain could be shaped afresh with new cultures living side by side in unity.

While we may lack the imperial guilt, there can be little doubt this view is apparent in Australia, perhaps even more so given our relative youth and more malleable historical and cultural foundations.

Orwell made a clear distinction between nationalism and patriotism.

He qualified nationalism as “the worst enemy of peace”, the belief one’s country was superior to others while patriotism was an attachment to and admiration of a nation’s way of life and “of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally”.

While Islamic terrorism is attractive to a very small proportion of the population, it highlights a weakness of liberal democracies in their lukewarm, sometimes conflicted promotion of a collective identity.

The gap for Islamists is filled by the fierce transnational identity that the Islamic notion of the ummah can build, a piety so strong they are prepared to sacrifice their lives. Macabre, evil and disgusting the actions may be, but the intensity of belief is in stark contrast to the relative apathy of mild-mannered secular atheists.

French philosopher Michel Onfray said in an interview last year on the topic of the decline of the West: “Who is ready to die for the values of the West or the values of the Enlightenment?”

Onfray questions the will of Westerners to fight for anything, believing we have been numbed by consumerism in a secular age that creates no attachment to God and country.

The strong patriotism of the US that integrates its extremely diverse population so successfully may explain why so few American-Muslims, as a proportion of the population, have gone to fight in Syria, compared with many thousands from Europe. The several hundred estimated to have travelled from Australia, as a percentage of our Muslim population, are many multiples greater than in America.

While an Australian republic is traditionally derided in conservative circles, there is a direct correlation with Tony Abbott’s Team Australia rhetoric and the intensification of patriotism a republic is likely to promote. It holds promise as a key plank in fostering a greater collective identity.

Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane championed a greater patriotism for the Left in his 2009 book *Reclaiming Patriotism: Nation-Building for Australian Progressives*. The reaction to a harmless T-shirt promoting love of country suggests the task has a considerable way to go.

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