
Has the death of multiculturalism been greatly exaggerated? In recent years, leaders of western liberal democracies, including David Cameron, Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy, have declared multiculturalism a failure, associating the policy with social exclusion, riots and terrorism. In Australia too, policy makers have avoided the ‘M’ word, preferring terms such as ‘diversity’. In his thought-provoking book, *Don’t Go Back To Where You Came From*, Tim Soutphommasane presents a compelling defence of Australian multiculturalism, arguing that it is unique from its European counterparts and has in fact been an overwhelming success. As a child of refugees and a first generation Australian, Soutphommasane personifies Australian multiculturalism as a national success story. His writings on patriotism, national identity and diversity as a political philosopher have invited accolades and debate in academic circles, yet one has the feeling that Soutphommasane is a public intellectual at heart. With regular contributions to major Australian newspapers and participation in policy development for public events such as Australia Day and Anzac Day, it appears he is just as enthusiastic to start a national debate across water coolers and dinner tables as he is within the academy. It follows that the book’s cover artwork is deliberately provocative. The title is boldly depicted as a tattoo on the back of a white male staring out across an Australian beach scene, upending one of Australia’s most infamous racial slurs. The resulting image both invokes and inverts the Cronulla race riots of 2005, an event which seemed to signal the failure of multiculturalism in Australia.

Chapter one explores the history of multiculturalism in Australia in the context of three phases of policy development. Firstly, assimilation, associated with post-war migration, in which new arrivals were expected to discard their traditions, language and customs. Soutphommasane then turns his attention to the introduction of multiculturalism by the Whitlam government in the early 1970s, associating efforts to address social and economic disadvantages faced by new migrants with a new cultural pluralism. The final phase of policy, and one which Soutphommasane believes should be emulated, is citizen-based multiculturalism, which he dates from the start of the 1990s. Since this time, Soutphommasane believes Australian multiculturalism has become embedded with stronger links to citizenship and national identity.

The second chapter argues that it is this citizen-based multiculturalism that has made Australia unique. Soutphommasane renounces a ‘lifestyle’ approach to multiculturalism, stating that ‘while an Australian civic culture may well encompass some social norms such as taking turns buying “shouts” or calling someone by their first name even if we’re not familiar with them, it isn’t accurately defined by a fondness for sport and barbeques, and a love of sand and surf’ (p.100). For Soutphommasane, multiculturalism is not just about tolerance - it requires a focus on citizenship, based on Australian values, as part of a concerted nation-building project. He argues that policies described as ‘multiculturalism’ in Europe are quite different to Australia, often characterised by exclusion or assimilation. In doing so, he illuminates the many ‘multiculturalisms’ that exist in the world, but marginalises other possible reasons that
may have led to immigrants integrating more easily within Australia. I believe social mobility associated with a prosperous nation characterised by low unemployment and access to education has certainly been a factor, so too has demographics. I find it interesting that Soutphommasane admits ‘anti-Muslim sentiment is perhaps the most prevalent form of radicalized hostility today’ (p.88), yet Australia has a comparatively low Muslim population compared to Europe.

Soutphommasane further acknowledges that multiculturalism has come under attack in recent years and the second half of the book is devoted to exploring tensions inherent within this Australian success story. He concedes that ‘the extent to which racism exists will speak volumes about the precise scale of Australian achievement’ (p.82) and chapters three, four and five discuss racism, contemporary debates surrounding population growth and the politicisation of asylum seekers. Soutphommasane admits that ‘for two centuries racism was a conspicuous feature of Australian society, guided as it was by an idea of white, British, nationhood’ (p.80) but argues that the advent of multiculturalism ‘signified the arrival of a revolution’ (p.2). However, his analysis underestimates the profound impact of the White Australia Policy on Australia’s national psyche and the ways in which it manifested in the nationalist populism of Pauline Hanson and John Howard. In policy terms, the introduction of multiculturalism shifted ‘whiteness’ from the heart of national identity to its periphery. In this way, multiculturalism didn’t just offer ‘a new language for discussing national identity’ (p.3), it overwrote a dark past. Instead of contributing to this silence, Soutphommasane’s analysis could have benefited from a greater engagement with the historic legacy of the White Australia Policy.

Soutphommasane believes that national unity rests on the ability to articulate a national story and, in many ways his book is as much about Australian citizenship as it is multiculturalism. In order to convey civic values, you need to first define what they are and Australians have often struggled to reach a consensus. This challenge is epitomised by the History Wars of the Howard era, in which historians and politicians argued over the best way to represent Australia’s past. Soutphommasane professes that meaningful civic values should be linked to our national story and points to a long history of democratic innovation, yet it is Anzac Day that he believes offers the most compelling opportunity to articulate these values. While he recognises ‘the challenge of reconciling Anzac Day remembrance with a multicultural Australia’ (p.103), he believes that the event holds the potential to be an occasion for all Australians to remember ‘the sacrifices and responsibilities of citizenship’ (p. 105). Despite Soutphommasane’s hopes, the handful of examples provided to illustrate the cultural diversity of Australian military forces remain unconvincing and he neglects to explore the exclusion of women from the Anzac narrative and the increasingly militaristic nature of remembrance. Indeed, what Soutphommasane recognises as the solution, others recognise as the problem: a greater emphasis on the Anzac Legend since the 1990s often linked to the resurgence of an enthusiastically Anglo-Celtic nationalism.

Although written for the general reader, the book provides thought-provoking fodder for academics in the Humanities. Soutphommasane’s scholarship exhibits a curious dichotomy for he writes as both a progressive and a patriot, arguing that the two are not mutually exclusive. He notes that many progressives shy away from contributing to constructions of nation and believes that any resurgence of jingoistic, flag-waving nationalism is compounded by the failure to articulate a compelling alternative narrative. Soutphommasane’s Don’t Go Back To Where You Came From is both accessible and intelligent, offering a call to arms to design a progressive patriotism based on civic responsibility and presenting a persuasive case for optimism.

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