

FRACTURED LOYALTIES

Australian citizenship and the crisis
of civic virtue

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Analysis Paper 79

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Can citizenship survive the end of tolerance?

One of the principal tenets of a secular liberal democracy is tolerance of difference, especially religious difference. It's a tenet that was hard won in the course of a series of bitter and bloody conflicts between princes, prelates and people that raged across Europe from the 17th century onwards.

Tolerance is also a principle that lies at the heart of the liberal conception of citizenship, which embraces the civic idea that members of a society recognise one another as free individuals worthy of equal concern and respect.

However, many Australians are now fearful that this conception of citizenship that underpins our civil society has been grievously harmed by an alarming spike in antisemitism. Not only is antisemitism a principal factor tearing at the heart of our secular liberal democracy, it represents a serious weakening of a commitment to the practice of core civic virtues and thus is undermining the very idea of what it is to be an Australian citizen.

Only a few years ago, antisemitism in this country was largely confined to the fringes of the political far left and far right, as well as to certain virulent Islamist eruptions of hatred of Jews in parts of our cities. However, for some 18 months following the invasion of Israel by Hamas in October 2023, Australian cities were marred by unprecedented protests, vandalism (including arson) and denunciation, all of which were expressions of Jew-hatred.

At first, these protests appeared to dwindle following the ceasefire arrangement struck between Israel and Hamas in late January 2025. However, a spike in antisemitic violence soon followed; as individuals, organisations and buildings were attacked or vandalised. Far from the ceasefire being a resolution — albeit temporary — of the conflict, Australian pro-Palestinian activists seized an opportunity to intensify expressions of hatred towards Jewish Australians.

Antisemitism is an ancient hatred, long predating Christianity, which has appeared in many different forms and has been provoked by different motives. It is a hatred that remains deeply entrenched in Western culture. The resurgence of antisemitism in Australia, from where it

has never been absent, was sparked by the October 7 attacks. Whereas one aspect of antisemitism has usually been the perceived powerlessness of Jews, the most recent manifestation — both in Australia and across the Anglosphere — has been fuelled by a belief in the power of Israel as a settler-colonialist state.¹

According to a new international survey by the Anti-Defamation League, global anti-Jewish sentiments are at an all-time high, having surged around the world since the start of the Israel-Hamas war. In Australia, the ADL survey found 20 per cent of Australians hold antisemitic views, compared with 14 per cent since its first survey in 2014.

Antisemitism in Australia has a number of dimensions. It is fuelled by historical prejudices and extremist political ideologies and, in recent years, has been amplified through, in particular, social media platforms. Indeed, the role of media in disseminating antisemitism is significant and some platforms have been accused of skewing coverage related to antisemitism, either by under-reporting incidents or by presenting biased narratives that exacerbate prejudices.

Media outlets like Qatar's *Al Jazeera* have also been criticised for disseminating content that may fuel antisemitic views, thereby influencing public perception and discourse. This selective coverage can shape public opinion and potentially legitimise antisemitic views, leading to increased discrimination and hostility towards Jewish communities.²

"Antisemitic tropes and beliefs are becoming alarmingly normalized across societies worldwide," ADL Senior Vice President for International Affairs Marina Rosenberg said. "This dangerous trend is not just a threat to Jewish communities — it's a warning to us all."³ Rosenberg's 'warning to us all' is about the threat to liberal societies posed by all forms of virulent religious intolerance, and racial and ethnic hatred, especially antisemitism.

Citizenship and belonging

A key element of a modern liberal conception of citizenship is that members of a society recognise one another as free individuals worthy of equal concern and respect. Citizenship embraces elements of political belonging and participation in the community, crucial components of the very concept of 'citizen' which is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as:

A person who belongs to a particular country, state, or commonwealth by birth or naturalization and has legally recognized rights and duties as a member of that entity.

The bond of citizenship is neither familial nor tribal. Rather, it represents the consensual assumption of obligations to others who, whilst sovereign individuals, are nonetheless strangers to one another.

Citizenship allows for opportunities to

participate on an equal basis with other citizens in the ordering of the social life of the community. It involves "the disposition to recognize and act upon obligations to those whom we do not know. It enables strangers to stand side by side against authority and to assert their common rights".⁴ The status of citizen thereby secures equal rights to enjoyment of collective goods provided by the state, "but also involves equal duties to promote and sustain them".⁵

But in order to flourish, citizenship depends upon the cultivation of liberal virtues, such as tolerance, respect for the rights of others, regard for one's fellow citizens, and moderation. Absence or decay of these virtues, as is now occurring in Australia, amounts to a crisis of civic virtue. This, in turn, threatens a coherent liberal conception of citizenship.

Australian citizenship: the bond of commitment

Australian citizenship was introduced by the *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948* (Cth). In 1949, the inaugural year of the Act, citizenship was conferred on 2,493 people from over 35 different nationalities.

The first citizenship ceremony saw the immigration minister, Arthur Calwell, call for new citizens to show respect for the Australian flag and to swear allegiance to our system of government. Calwell expressed the hope that our democratic processes would continue to be the means by which peaceful resolution of political differences was possible, calling on the "common sense and national goodwill of the Australian people".⁶

Australian citizenship is popular with migrants to this country and many aspire to assume citizenship once they have

settled here.⁷ In 2022-23, a total of 192,947 people from over 200 different nationalities had Australian citizenship conferred on them.⁸ New citizens are required by the *Australian Citizenship Act 2007* (Cth) to take a pledge of commitment to Australia:

*From this time forward, [at this point the optional words "under God" may be used] I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people, whose democratic beliefs I share, whose rights and liberties I respect, and whose laws I will uphold and obey.*⁹

On taking this pledge, an individual assumes a series of responsibilities to obey the laws of Australia, to vote in elections, to defend the country should the need arise and to serve on jury duty if required to do so.

Multiculturalism: a culture of repudiation?

There is an emerging crisis with Australian citizenship: that sense of belonging, participation and recognition on which it depends is in decline. It is a crisis of civic virtue foreshadowed in warnings about the future of Australian multiculturalism issued by Laksiri Jayasuriya, an Australian academic. In order to succeed, the policy of multiculturalism needs effectively to combine cultural pluralism with the rights, duties and obligations entailed by citizenship. But as Jayasuriya warned:

Running through this was a tension that indicated that multiculturalism was conditional, in that mutual coexistence of different cultures was permissible only provided there was an acceptance by new settlers of the commonalities embodied in the Australian political system and its social legal institutions.¹⁰

But this acceptance is weakening. One reason for this weakening is that the idea of membership of a given political community of equals on which the concept of citizenship depends has deteriorated. Such membership entails a degree of solidarity and reciprocity between citizens.

It is this, as political scientist Richard Bellamy has remarked, that lies at the heart of citizenship. "They need to see each other as equal partners within a collective enterprise in which they share the costs as well as the benefits".¹¹ However, this sense of solidarity and reciprocity has given way to a fragmentation generated by identity politics coupled with frustration at any demand that membership of that community entails a sense of exclusivity.

Multiculturalism, in its pursuit of 'inclusivity', has sought to marginalise the inherited customs and *mores* that go to define our national identity in order that newcomers may feel at home that much more quickly. This repudiation of culture is "devoted to rooting out old and unsustainable loyalties. And when the old loyalties die, so does the old form of membership".¹²

This culture of repudiation, in turn, serves to undermine national identity by weakening social cohesion and corroding the principles that underpin a common culture.¹³ It also has an impact on

education, exposing students to curricula promoting settler-colonial theories and encouraging them to repudiate notions of Australian national identity.¹⁴

Cultural fragmentation has been exacerbated as multiculturalism has generated enclaves that seek to preserve cultures distinct from the host state.¹⁵ Enclaves are the antithesis of a cohesive and integrated society. Bellamy describes the emergence of enclaves as a form of vertical division that erodes capacity for toleration and compromise. Yet he remarks, "it is precisely this need [for compromise] that produces toleration and mutual recognition between citizens, enabling all to be seen as equals and to some degree be included within any winning majority".¹⁶

"Has multiculturalism been a success or are we a nation of parallel communities?" asks sociologist Bryan Turner of contemporary Australian society.

While the idea of multiculturalism as a social policy tends to focus on culture, a more acid test arises with legal pluralism. Competing legal traditions necessarily raise more acute difficulties than cultural pluralism, as the former brings the nature of sovereignty into play.¹⁷

The argument propounded by advocates of multiculturalism, that the permanent coexistence of distinct cultural enclaves within the same country is not only possible but desirable, needs to be countered. A liberal nation is more than a geo-political space providing a home to separate cultures each of which enjoys equal legal and social status. For as British economist Paul Collier argues, "reducing nationality to a mere legalism — a set of rights and obligations — would be the collective equivalent of autism: life lived with rules but without empathy".¹⁸

Belonging and engagement in decline

One of the most authoritative accounts of the social health of Australian society is the annual *Mapping Social Cohesion* (MSC) report published every year since 2007 by the Scanlon Foundation.

In its most recent report, published in 2023, MSC found that whereas for a long time there has been “a strong sense of pride and belonging in Australia”, a marked decline has been recorded over the past decade, which is a cause for concern.¹⁹ The Scanlon-Monash Index of belonging declined from a benchmark score of 100 in 2007 to 91 in 2013. It fell again to 81 in 2022 and then to its lowest score of 78 in 2023.

Whereas a majority of people continue to have “at least a moderate sense of pride and belonging in Australia”, MSC found that the proportion of those who have “at least a moderate level of pride in the Australian way of life and culture” has declined from 87 in 2018 to 82 in 2023. Those who have such pride “to a great extent” declined from 43 in 2018 to 33 in 2023.²⁰

MSC 2023 also recorded a decline in the proportion of those who strongly agree that “in the modern world, maintaining the Australian way of life and culture is important”. In 2007, the proportion was 65 per cent but had fallen to just 40 per cent by 2023. “Overall, belief in the importance of the Australian way of life and culture declined by 13 percentage points between 2007 and 2023.”²¹

This recorded decline both in a sense of pride and belonging *and* in a commitment to preserving the Australian way of life is reflected in a diminishing sense of community, although with a recorded decline of 1 per cent from 2021 to 2022, this is not quite as precipitous.²² Even so, MSC 2023 concluded that “the sense of national pride and belonging in Australia continue to decline and are now at their lowest levels since [2007]”.²³ However, it is important to note that despite generating significant problems, a substantial proportion of the population believes that multiculturalism in Australia has been beneficial and actually makes the country stronger.²⁴

Australia still faces challenges in maintaining social cohesion amid economic

pressures. Financial stress has impacted Australians’ sense of belonging, with social cohesion metrics remaining steady but strained over the past year.²⁵ Furthermore, the Productivity Commission has warned of increasing immigrant separatism and its negative implications for social cohesion. The commission notes that the ease of communication with family and friends in immigrants’ countries of origin, along with access to home-language media, has made it easier for some individuals to maintain separate identities, potentially undermining key norms and understandings important to Australian society.

The Productivity Commission’s report, *Migrant Intake into Australia*, published in 2016, discusses concerns about immigrant integration and social cohesion. The report notes that advancements in communication technologies have made it easier for immigrants to maintain strong connections with their countries of origin, potentially leading to decreased efforts at integration. This, in turn, raises concerns about the possibility of separatism, which could undermine key norms and longstanding understandings vital to the functioning of Australian society.

The report emphasises the importance of successful multiculturalism in maintaining social cohesion by fostering respect and trust among different ethnic groups within the Australian community. It also highlights the need for the government to review and enhance settlement services, including English-language training and employment services, to improve labour market outcomes and social engagement for all permanent immigrants.²⁶

A key point underlying this analysis is that as people feel less committed to their local communities, engage less in social, communal and civic activities and have a declining sense of national pride and belonging (accompanied by a marked decline in trust in government),²⁷ the foundations of strong citizenship are weakened.

Rates of volunteering in Australia have declined sharply over the past decade, as revealed by figures released by Volunteering Australia which show that

formal volunteering through organisations has decreased from 36 per cent of adults in 2010 to 29 per cent in 2019.²⁸ The decline in volunteering represents a challenge to the nation's social and economic health because volunteers are integral to community support and resilience. In order to address this issue, a concerted effort will be required to engage different sections of the community — particularly younger individuals — to revitalise the volunteer sector.

Over the past two decades, Australians have also been less involved in social, community and civic groups. Some 20 years ago, around 66 per cent of Australians were members of such groups; today, that proportion has diminished to around 50 per cent. This trend suggests a weakening of social cohesion and a potential erosion of communal ties.²⁹ This decline in civic and community engagement can lead to a weakening of communal bond and a diminished sense of civic responsibility. Addressing this issue will require a concerted effort to revitalise community involvement, enhance civics education and foster a culture of active participation across all demographics.

Diminishing commitment is also reflected in a decline in voter turnout at elections,

notwithstanding Australia's compulsory voting laws. The 2022 federal election saw participation drop below 90 per cent for the first time since compulsory voting was introduced in 1924, marking the lowest turnout in a century. This downward trend has been evident since the 2007 federal election, with turnout rates steadily decreasing from the historical average of around 95 per cent. The Australian Electoral Commission's data confirms this decline, showing a turnout of 90 per cent in the 2022 election.³⁰

Several factors may contribute to this decline in voter participation. A study published in February 2025 highlighted that young people have a limited understanding of their participation in compulsory voting regimes.³¹ In addition, a study published in 2024 by the Australian National University showed that only 38 per cent of Australians have confidence in the federal government, approaching the low levels seen before the 2022 election. This erosion of trust may lead to voter apathy and disengagement.³²

Decline in voter turnout poses a significant challenge to Australia's system of parliamentary government and has prompted discussions on how to re-engage the electorate and restore confidence in the political system.

Is a 'liberal' conception of citizenship enough?

High levels of immigration accompanied by a commitment to turn migrants into citizens has long been part of Australia's 'nation-building' process. Requirements for naturalisation in this country remain considerably less stringent (although certainly not minimal) than those prevailing in European countries, such as Germany and Austria, or in Japan. This, in turn, reflects a particular 'liberal individualist' understanding of Australian citizenship that places greater emphasis on the rights and liberties held by individuals against one another and the state, than on obligations and duties owed to the wider political community.

Indeed, some liberal critics express concern that alarm about the demise of citizenship is overstated and that the demands of

citizenship should be no more onerous than they already are. Others, while remaining committed to the autonomy and freedom of the individual, argue not so much that citizenship is decaying, but that ideas of what it means *to be* a citizen are evolving from a 'liberal individualist' conception to a more 'civic republican' one. This evolution represents a shift in emphasis on what is deemed most significant for citizenship.

Liberal individualist conceptions of citizenship emphasise the bundle of rights and entitlements that go with citizenship, such as rights to freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of religion and freedom from arbitrary arrest. These rights are deemed to inhere in the individual and are essential for protecting the dignity

and status of the citizen. The state has an important role to play in securing and protecting those rights. The focus is on the *status* of the individual which must be protected by the state “both from the predatoriness of other individuals and from the arbitrariness of governments”.³³

This emphasis on the status of the individual means that the liberal individualist conception of citizenship is essentially contractual, as noted by political scientist Adrian Oldfield. “It neither creates nor sustains any social solidarity or cohesion, or any sense of common purpose. Apart from the immediate network of familiar faces, the world is composed of strangers.”³⁴ This is an essentially atomistic conception of citizenship. By imposing on the individual citizen little more than the minimal duty of respecting other citizens as autonomous, sovereign individuals, the liberal individualist conception can lead to social fragmentation rather than social cohesion.

The liberal-individualist conception has a particular hold on the political imagination of many in the Anglosphere and is one which thereby enjoys a particular primacy. One reason for this is the lengthy and protracted struggle to articulate, proclaim and defend the rights of the individual and impose limits on the power of the state that informed a great deal of Enlightenment thinking and activism during the 17th and 18th centuries.

While not denying the value of the liberal-individualist conception of citizenship as one of status, Oldfield is one of a number of scholars who have sought to address what they consider to be a notable deficiency in this conception. They propose, instead, a civic-republican conception of citizenship in which the emphasis is placed not on the status of the citizen but on citizenship as an activity or *practice*.

This emphasis, in turn, gives rise to the language of ‘duties’ that must be discharged if an individual is to be established as a citizen among other citizens. Rather than a contractual relationship, “it is a communally based conception of citizenship: individuals are only citizens as members of a community. The social bonds between citizens are based upon sharing and determining a way of life”.³⁵ The emphasis on practice *and* participation in a civic republican conception of citizenship means the identity

and continuity of a particular political community is a *shared* responsibility.

It is not a responsibility which individuals can, as citizens, choose to take on or not, for it is in the exercise of the responsibility that they both become and remain citizens.³⁶

A civic republican conception of citizenship may appear to be somewhat irreconcilable with the liberal-individualistic conception of citizenship as status. It is not so much that now the liberal-individualistic conception needs to be displaced, rather the question is whether this conception of citizenship can usefully be developed by incorporating elements of a civic republican emphasis on practice and duties.

Rather than being thought of as competing with one another, it is more helpful to conceive these two conceptions as complementary. Indeed, British political scientist David Miller, holds that civic republicanism *adds* to a liberal individualist conception the idea that citizens must act in a certain way rather than simply substituting practice for status.³⁷ Thus, the key civic, political and legal freedoms that are described as ‘rights’ and which underpin one conception, can be reconceived in a civic republican model as identifying the *conditions* necessary for citizens to be able to agree with and engage in the practice of citizenship.

But what kind of agreement might it be reasonable to expect for the civic republican conception of citizenship to function effectively in a plural society? After all, liberalism is underpinned by a commitment to tolerance in the face of difference and in particular, by a commitment to the ideal of religious tolerance. In a sense, all that is required of the liberal individualist citizen is a commitment to accepting the fact of difference. Civic republicanism, by contrast, appears to assume a degree of homogeneity in a society with agreement about the standing of common traditions, habits and beliefs.

However, as Miller argues, this need not be so. The demands of a plural society — such as distinct religious traditions and approaches to educating children — are bound to be variegated. Even so, “the success of any particular demand will depend upon how far it can be expressed in terms that are close to the general

political ethos of the community".³⁸ Thus, even in a plural society, the civic republican conception of citizenship is more pragmatic in that it searches for agreement through the practical exercise of politics:

It does not require participants to subscribe to any fixed principles other than those implicit in political dialogue itself — a willingness to argue and to listen to reasons given by others, abstention from violence and coercion, and so forth.³⁹

While practical conditions may be a necessary factor for the practice of citizenship, they are not sufficient: as Oldfield, Miller and other scholars have noted, what is also needed are

opportunities for citizens to participate in the life of the political community. This requires that as many political functions of the state as possible are decentralised: "what is being sought here is the creation and widening of opportunities for responsible self-government by citizens".⁴⁰

This, in turn, can help to overcome the problem of what one scholar has referred to as "bureaucratic capture" whereby over-centralisation of administration by the state attenuates both responsibilities more appropriately exercised by local and community tiers of government *and* wider opportunities for civic engagement.⁴¹ Creating opportunities is one thing, however, encouraging citizens to seize those opportunities is another.

Making interest coincide with duty: discouraging the 'free-riding' individual

Even with such opportunities and requisite conditions, however, an individual who may nonetheless recognize what her duties are as a citizen cannot be compelled to perform those duties. The 'free-riding' individual thereby presents a challenge to every political community that depends for its health upon the mutual engagement of citizens. In some instances, such as national military service or jury service, an individual can be compelled by law to assume the duties that go with citizenship.

However, compulsion has its limits. Successful engagement of citizens that reduces — if not entirely eliminating — the problem of free-riding depends upon fostering an appropriate cluster of norms, habits and traditions that encourage the practice of citizenship. This is also to recognise that a culture is not a fixed entity passed from one generation to another, but is a fluid and evolving phenomenon.

Civic republicanism places greater emphasis upon the importance of cultivating moral agency by educating individuals in a life-long process in the arts of citizenship. Critics of civic republicanism might argue that the practice of cultivating the citizen threatens liberal ideas about the

sovereignty and moral autonomy of the individual because it coaxes the individual towards one set of practices rather than another. Indeed, as Oldfield notes, "it is the toleration that liberal individualism has for abdication from politics that marks its division from civic republicanism".⁴² But as will be argued, this objection carries less weight than liberals might wish since to coax and encourage is not to coerce or compel.

In broad terms, the two conceptions of citizenship are distinguished only by differences as to what 'freedom' means and what 'autonomy' consists in. Whereas liberal individualism holds the citizen to be free when left alone by the state — living in "the silence of the law", to use a phrase of Thomas Hobbes — the civic republican conception of citizenship holds that the citizen can only enjoy freedom (moral autonomy) when duty coincides with an interest in discharging that duty. "Human beings not only have to be taught what moral autonomy means in practice, they have to be reminded of what it is they have been taught."⁴³ Effective citizenship depends on a willingness to engage repeatedly in its practice, and on the efficacy of the culture in promoting this practice.

Does a shared sense of national identity matter?

Nationalism is out of fashion in progressive circles. Yet recent election results in the United States and several European countries (including the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Italy and France) suggest that concerns about the integrity of national identity, autonomy and even cultural distinctiveness weigh heavily on the minds of many citizens of those countries. Even so, fears that nationalism in any form is inherently dangerous helps to explain why for some influential groups in Australia — in the media, the academy and the corporate sector, in particular — the idea of taking pride in this, or any nation is distasteful to many.

Yet nationalism and a sense of national pride can express a shared sense of identity that undergirds both the readiness and the willingness of citizens to cooperate with one another. Indeed, a range of thinkers from across the political spectrum (from scholars such as Roger Scruton to David Miller and Will Kymlicka) argue that successful functioning of the nation state depends upon its citizens sharing a sense of national identity.

In order to be an effective component of the nation state, a sense of national identity needs to be about more than an understanding of how the rules and norms of a particular state function. Scruton is one thinker who places equal, if not greater, emphasis on the cultural traditions and practices that define a nation. For Scruton, the social is morally prior to the political and his approach has been neatly summarised by Canadian scholar Ronald Beiner:

[In Scruton's view] what ultimately sustains the liberal state is not a sense of *political* membership in the state but the *social* loyalties and allegiances that define nationhood, and therefore that citizenship is a political concept is ultimately parasitic upon nationhood as a social concept.⁴⁴ [Italics in original]

One indicator that Scruton's views are beginning to be influential in many high-immigration countries, including Australia, is that naturalisation policies for aspiring citizens increasingly require knowledge of the official language, familiarity with

a country's history and culture, and a demonstrable level of acculturation — that is, "the social and cultural trappings of membership".⁴⁵

As this position becomes increasingly prevalent, it is clear that liberal-individualist and civic-republican conceptions of citizenship are also converging: both accept that in order to enjoy the privileges of citizenship, an individual needs to be a full and functioning member of society. Ascription of rights is no longer sufficient; assumption (and understanding) of obligations is now necessary.

Critics of what might be termed the 'acculturation' approach to citizenship may, of course, object on two principal grounds. First, it is notoriously difficult to summarise and express the essence of a national culture. In Australia, is our national culture expressed by the sunny beach, the rolling surf, the thwack of leather on willow, the prominent baring of tattooed flesh, or the vast brown expanse of the interior? Who can say? It's an impossible exercise. And as more migrants settle in Australia and become citizens, so the fluid cultural character of the nation will continue to change.

In 1999, Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, was widely criticised for his attempt to insert the word 'mateship' — intended as an expression of the essence of Australian identity — into the Preamble to the Australian Constitution. Critics attacked him both for misusing the word and for attempting to stretch its meaning to serve what was considered to be a political purpose.⁴⁶ Similarly, when British Prime Minister, John Major, attempted in 1993 to express the essence of 'Englishness' in terms of warm beer, long shadows on county cricket grounds, dog-lovers and "old maids cycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist", he was roundly (and rightly) derided.⁴⁷

A second objection strikes more directly at the heart of liberal conceptions of the state, for an important tenet of liberalism is that beyond prescribing (especially religious) tolerance, it does not prescribe or impose a specific conception of the good life. As political scientist James Hampshire, observes:

A requirement that naturalising citizens assimilate to a thick national culture comes perilously close to the imposition of a particular conception of the good, which would violate the liberal ideal of public neutrality.⁴⁸

While this is a fair criticism, even Hampshire concedes, correctly, that the success of a state depends not only on its institutions but also on the attitudes, behaviour and dispositions of its citizens. Taken together, these dispositions form a crucial component of what can be understood to be the 'national character'.

The liberal-individualist conception of citizenship can, therefore, no longer depend solely on the conferring of rights on the individual. Pluralism places demands on social cohesion which, in turn, depends upon the kind of involvement in — *and commitment* to — civic life called for by the civic-republican conception of citizenship. Even scholars sceptical of the political value of nationalism — albeit wary of "falling into the trap of nostalgic promotion of nationalist dogma" — accept that a concept of "national consciousness" of one form or another is a necessary condition of the effective functioning of a political community.⁴⁹

Citizenship and the cultivation of virtue

A principal behaviour or practice contributing to elevated levels of cooperation and cohesion in a society is trust; this must, in turn, be underpinned by a presumption that trust will be reciprocated. However, trust and cooperation do not just spring up, as Paul Collier has observed, they form part of a series of 'functional attitudes' that are part of the fabric of modern society.

The bedrock of rational trust is knowledge that the society is characterized by mutual regard: because people have some sympathy for each other, it is sensible to presume that a cooperative action will be reciprocated.⁵⁰

Collier also argues that the higher the levels of trust in a society, the more prosperous that society is likely to be. This is because "high-trust societies face lower transaction costs because they are less dependent on processes of formal enforcement".⁵¹ The functional attitudes so crucial to prosperity are absent in poorer societies because levels of trust and social cooperation are much lower.

Thus, in assessing the merits of multiculturalism, for example, Collier warns that problems will arise when migrants come from societies with lower levels of trust and cooperation, and where the norms, institutions and rules of those societies function poorly. Indeed, the

cultures are likely to be the very cause of the poverty from which they seek to escape. Whereas the well-intentioned might call for the need to respect other cultures, Collier emphasises the importance of the civic virtue of trust, arguing that "if a decent living standard is something to be valued, then on this criterion, not all cultures are equal".⁵²

As argued earlier, the liberal state may not compel cultivation of civic virtue by coercive means. To do so would be illiberal. After all, virtuous behaviour, such as telling the truth, is a desirable ideal, but it is not an enforceable obligation unless, under certain circumstances (such as when testifying under oath) the obligation is also a legal requirement.

Even so, while coercion may not be possible (or desirable), the liberal state nonetheless has a role to play in cultivating and encouraging the practice of civic virtue amongst its citizens. School systems provide the most obvious example. Students can be educated in the ways of virtuous behaviour. By learning how to cooperate with one another, students also learn how to cooperate with the rest of society, thereby lowering future transaction costs. They can also be equipped with an understanding of their legal and political rights, as well as learning about the institutions that uphold those rights. While these skills can be learned in the school, they are developed,

as the child grows to adulthood, in an ongoing participation in the home, the workplace and society at large.

Virtuous behaviour can also be expressed by effective political leadership. Politics in a liberal democracy invariably involves a certain degree of horse-trading and deal-making that can entail having to compromise in the pursuit of particular outcomes. Few dispute this, even though it is perhaps one of the factors that diminishes the standing of politicians in the eyes of the public.

However, elected representatives confronted by divisive and destructive conduct in the wider community can unite across the political divide both to denounce such conduct and to reassure the public that certain standards of behaviour are to be expected of all members of a society. With certain notable exceptions, such as NSW Premier Chris Minns, this is something many of our political leaders, including Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, have failed to do in the face of the eruption of violent antisemitism on Australian streets. The motives for such avoidance — whether indifference to the issue, pursuit of electoral advantage or some other

reason — do not excuse this failure to set an example of civic virtue to all Australian citizens, and to those who aspire to become citizens.

For better or worse, the elected political leader — perhaps more than the judge, the schoolteacher or the newspaper editor — has a principal role in shaping and guiding the evolution of a national culture. When truth gives way to deceit, conviction to equivocation, courage to timidity, or tolerance to insouciance, the bonds that unite citizens to one another are gradually weakened and the bedrock of social cohesion steadily eroded.

“It is time for influential people and politicians to speak out against antisemitism regardless of any political advantage they may gain by being silent,” argued the editorial writers at *The Weekend Australian* newspaper in late January 2025, citing the exhortation of Sir Frank Lowy.⁵³ Cultivation of good citizenship demands certain standards of behaviour from us all. Failure to attend to the crisis of civic virtue with which Australia is faced threatens to loosen the bonds of trust and civility which can yet be the mark of our national identity.

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A key element of a modern liberal conception of citizenship is that members of a society recognise one another as free individuals worthy of equal concern and respect. One of the principal tenets of a secular liberal democracy is tolerance of difference, especially religious difference. Tolerance is also a principle that lies at the heart of the liberal conception of citizenship; which embraces the civic idea that members of a society recognise one another as free individuals worthy of equal concern and respect. However, many Australians are now fearful that this conception of citizenship that underpins our civil society has been grievously harmed by an alarming collapse of tolerance.

In this Analysis Paper, Peter Kurti argues that cultivation of good citizenship demands certain standards of behaviour from us all. Failure to attend to the crisis of civic virtue with which Australia is faced threatens to loosen the bonds of trust and civility which can yet be the mark of our national identity.



About the Author

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Related Works

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