

Submission for Legal and Constitutional References Committee: Inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy

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National Identity, Social Cohesion, and Trust in Institutions

0. Introduction

Summary: It may seem that a strong cultural identity is necessary for a functioning democracy – we all need to feel like we are one in a cultural sense, and Australia has certainly gone the path of promoting such an identity since at least the Howard Government. In this submission, however, I will demonstrate that major institutions can be supported in other ways. As I will demonstrate, worries about national identity are misplaced.

The remainder of this submission is drawn from Peter Balint, *Respecting Toleration: Traditional Liberalism & Contemporary Diversity* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

It may seem that a government not enforcing or at least strongly encouraging ‘this is the way we do things here’, or not endorsing a particular, even if very broad, way of life will lead to a fractured non-functioning polity. That is, we need some shared cultural glue to bind us all together. While some do argue for an intrinsic good of national identification, the stronger argument seems to be for the instrumental good of national identification: it brings about and maintains important public goods that would not otherwise survive. Here I will focus on two key public goods, welfare redistribution and national defence, that seem essential for modern democracies. Although I will treat them separately, it is worth noting that these two public goods should be concerns that motivate those on both the left and right of the political spectrum.

1. Welfare redistribution

By its very nature, welfare redistribution places different requirements on citizens. How can those who see themselves as bearing the bigger burden be encouraged to keep supporting such a system? Because most liberals think welfare redistribution is a matter of justice, this is an extremely important question. One answer, given by liberal nationalists, is the fostering and maintaining of a common national culture. This allows citizens who will never meet each other to feel like they belong to the same group and have the necessary trust and fellow feeling that the transferring of resources seems to require. In the words of Yael Tamir:

Willingness to assume the burdens entailed by distributive justice...rests on an assumption that liberal theory cannot itself provide, namely, a feeling of relatedness to those with whom we share our assets...Communal solidarity creates a feeling...of closeness and shared fate, which is a precondition of distributive justice...[T]he community-like nature of the nation-state is particularly well suited, and perhaps even necessary, to the notion of the liberal welfare state.¹

So because this redistribution is seen as a matter of justice it would seem that the requirement to foster a common national culture is justified. Here, though, I want to challenge this argument, and show how this is not the case.

The argument of the liberal nationalists relies on trust. As David Miller, probably the most well-known liberal nationalist, puts it:

I take it as virtually self-evident that ties of community are an important source of trust between individuals who are not personally known to one another and who are in no position directly to monitor one another's behaviour...Trust assumes particular importance if we ask about the conditions under which individuals will give their support to schemes of social justice, particularly schemes involving redistribution.²

But trust can be understood in two quite different ways. The first is particular, and this seems to be the type of trust used by liberal nationalists. Here somebody will trust/not trust somebody as an X to do/not do something.³ Here experience is important: good experiences with a particular type of person lead to trusting this type of person again (and the reverse is true too). Because we do not and cannot all know each other in any viable contemporary state, it seems liberal nationalists want the X to be 'one of us': citizens trust unknown citizens because by sharing a common culture they are 'one of us'.

The second type of trust is generalised rather than particular.⁴ Generalised trust is much less contingent on particular experiences and characteristics, and is more like a moral disposition in which a person is either likely to trust or not. This means, unlike particularised trust, generalised trusters are more likely to trust those not in their in-group. Rather than A trusts B as an X, generalised trusters are better described simply as 'A trusts'.⁵ Citizens who are generalised trusters have many positive social characteristics; they tend to be more tolerant of minorities, be more active in both politics and civic organisations, give more to charities, have a more positive view of their democratic institutions, and be more optimistic in general.⁶ They are also more likely to support welfare redistribution.

¹ Tamir (1993: 118, 121). In a similar vein, Kymlicka (1995: 77) argues: 'The sort of solidarity essential for a welfare state requires that citizens have a strong sense of common identity and common membership, so that they will make sacrifices for each other, and this common identity is assumed to require (or at least be facilitated by) a common language and history'.

² Miller (1995: 92-93); see also Miller (1989: 51).

³ See Weinstock (1999: 287). As Weinstock (1999: 297) more formally puts it: A trusts B as an X to Ø, where X can be seen as ranging over roles or 'politically salient identities'.

⁴ Uslaner (2002).

⁵ Uslaner (2002: Ch. 2).

⁶ Rothstein and Uslaner (2005: 41).

What is most interesting is that generalised trust ‘depends upon a foundation of economic and social equality and contributes to the development of a more egalitarian society’.⁷ The more economically and socially equal a society is, in both outcomes and opportunities, the more generalised trust that exists, and with it the more likelihood for support of policies to maintain this equality. According to Eric Uslaner and Bo Rothstein, inequality, of either incomes or opportunities, undermines generalised trust, and conversely, equality supports this type of trust – this correlation can be demonstrated across a range of countries.⁸

Importantly, targeted responsibility-sensitive understandings of welfare that many contemporary theories of justice justify (and which have now become commonplace in political practice), would seem to undermine generalised trust. As Rothstein argues, targeted approaches to welfare can actually lead to more economic inequality and less equality of opportunity, and decrease generalised trust. Universalising welfare and not worrying so precisely about issues of procedural fairness can, on the other hand, increase generalised trust as well as lead to greater economic equality and equality of opportunity. It seems countries that have a high number of universal welfare programs, for example those of Scandinavia, usually have much greater generalised trust (and less economic inequality), than countries that have a proportionally higher number of targeted welfare programs.⁹

From this we might surmise that if almost all members of society feel they are benefiting from a welfare program, then it is more likely to have broad support. Yes, this does result in welfare ‘churn’, but it also results in the long term viability of such programs. Presumably those who pay more feel they are getting something and are part of the program – treated fairly in their eyes – and those who under a targeted program would usually be subject to a great deal of scrutiny to prove the authenticity of their need are less likely to have their generalised trust undermined too.¹⁰ So it seems that universal welfare programs result in a greater redistribution of wealth than targeted programs, especially, but not only, with a system of progressive taxation.¹¹

Summary: There is no need to assume that shared cultural identity is necessary to support welfare redistribution. Such a scheme can be sustained if sufficient numbers of people sense the scheme is just, and this is more likely with universal rather than targeted welfare. So while it may be tempting to argue that the importance of welfare redistribution justifies fostering a national cultural identity, the case is far from clear

⁷ Rothstein and Uslaner (2005: 45).

⁸ Rothstein and Uslaner (2005). For example, in Italy generalised trust rose from 24 percent of the surveyed population in 1960 to 35 percent in 1990, while income inequality fell from 0.410 in 1974 to 0.322 in 1990; while in Mexico, trust rose from 8.2 percent to 28 percent in 1996, and economic inequality moved from 0.550 to 0.503 in 1992. See also Rothstein (1998); Uslaner (2002); and Rothstein (2005).

⁹ Rothstein (1998: n 27, Ch 6).

¹⁰ Rothstein and Uslaner (2005: n. 25, 43, 59-63); Rothstein (1998: n. 23).

¹¹ Rothstein (1998: n. 27, Ch 6).

2. *Defending the Nation*

While the importance of distributive justice has been commonly used by liberals for the necessity of national cultural identity, less has been written on national defence, and this may be because it seems a more straightforward case. Surely, you might think, the soldier who willingly steps into harm's way must be motivated by a strong love of country – and one well beyond any merely *civic* identification. Indeed, this is the common way of memorialising the fallen soldier, as one who died for 'us', and whatever cultural attributes 'us' stands for. Perhaps even more strongly is the fact that while most left-liberals will support welfare redistribution, national defence has much broader support: it is quite easy to make a very strong argument that a legitimate, and perhaps even the primary, aim of the state is the defence and protection of its citizens. So surely here, then, the fostering of a common culture *is* justified.

Soldiers are not, however, the only people in our societies who take risks and perform roles of personal hardship and sacrifice for the benefit of others: ambulance officers, nurses, firefighters, community sector workers, teachers in difficult schools, and even many police, among others, also fit this description. These other roles are not usually thought of as requiring strong national identification. It is hard to think that the firefighter, for example, who bursts into the burning building is thinking about love of country. Nor would it seem national identification is motivating the nurse working in the underfunded public emergency department. While these sorts of workers will no doubt have mixed motivations, it seems reasonable to assume their motivations are probably vocational, often pragmatic, and when they are other-regarding, perhaps it is a sense of service in general that is in play, rather than to 'the nation'. Now it might be that these professions do not seem 'dangerous' enough to require the extra motivation of national identification. But if the issue is simply danger or being willing to 'put yourself in harm's way', then one only needs to look at logging workers or professional fisherpersons – the two most deadly occupations in the US¹² – to see that danger seems to have little to do with national identification at all.

It should then come as little surprise that if we look at the empirical evidence, soldiers also have a range of motivations for joining the military, many of which have little to do with national identification. US studies have consistently shown that occupational reasons such as pay and conditions, educational expenses and opportunities, and vocational training motivate the voluntary enlistment of a large proportion of soldiers¹³ - something not lost on recruiters, whose advertising has played on these occupational motivations.¹⁴

Within military sociology, 'occupational' motivations are usually contrasted with 'institutional' or 'intrinsic' motivations for enlistment.¹⁵ In the US at least, there has been a discernible rise in institutional motivations since the turn of this century.¹⁶ It might seem that it is within these institutional motivations that we would find strong evidence of the

¹² In 2014, logging workers had a fatality rate of 110 per 100 000, and fishers and related fishing workers had a rate of 81 per 100 000. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014).

¹³ See for example Gorman and Thomas (1991); Griffith and Perry (1993); Lakhani and Fugita (1993); Eighmey (2006); Woodruff, Kelty, and Segal (2006); and Griffith (2008).

¹⁴ Eighmey (2006: 323-324); Griffith (2008: 34, 232).

¹⁵ This distinction was first introduced by Moskos (1977).

¹⁶ See for example Eighmey (2006); Griffith (2008).

importance of national cultural identification. Unfortunately, most studies lump together several quite different types of motivation in the institutional category, including: ‘experience military training/a military life’, ‘be physically and mentally challenged’, ‘develop discipline and confidence’, ‘have friends in the military’, ‘teamwork’, ‘leadership skills’, ‘self-discipline’, ‘pride in accomplishments’, ‘earn respect from people who are important in your life’, ‘make a positive difference in your community’, among many others, as well as the more patriotic and potentially more nationalist ‘serve my country’ or ‘do something for my country’.¹⁷ So it is not as simple as equating institutional motivations with some kind of national identification.

Even when ‘service to country’ does play a strong role it certainly does not stand alone, and is usually combined with other much less patriotic motivations.¹⁸ Indeed, on some older surveys the question relating to ‘service to country’ was simply phrased as ‘serving others’, suggesting a much more general service motivation rather than one requiring national cultural identification. And even if ‘country’ is a necessary part of this motivation, it should not be assumed as a cultural rather than civic affiliation.

Looking beyond the US, it seems a modern military can function with very little of this motivation – whether it be cultural, civic or simply general. According to one study, Belgian officer recruits only ranked ‘to serve one’s country’ in thirteenth place (33 per cent), with the separately measured ‘patriotism’ in sixteenth place (20 per cent). In contrast, ‘intellectual and physical training’ (79 per cent) and ‘full of action’ (77 per cent) were the most common motivations.¹⁹ An earlier study of enlisted personnel had found a similar pattern.²⁰ It may well be that one of the explanations for this lack of patriotic motivation lies in the division between the Flemish and Walloon sections of the Belgian population. But nevertheless, it seems the military can still recruit and retain its members, and it is worth noting that the US is not without its own deep social divisions.

Diversity in recruitment is nothing new or unusual – militaries from Ireland, Great Britain, France and Belgium, among others, actively recruit non-nationals. More historically, and with a highly exclusionary (and legally enforced) national identity in place – the ‘White Australia’ policy – the Australian volunteer military in World War One had a significant number of non-British and non-Australian born men, even when expressed as a percentage of the general population. Several of these soldiers even came from countries which were considered ‘non-white’, and many of whom went on to win important medals of valour.²¹

I am not challenging the fact that many military personnel show strong national cultural identification - clearly some do - but instead I am suggesting that it may not be a necessary

¹⁷ Eighmey (2006); Griffith (2008). It should be noted that these studies differ in what they classify as institutional reasons and as occupational reasons, although all do categorise patriotic and nationalist motivations as institutional.

¹⁸ Woodruff, Kelty, and Segal (2006); Griffith (2008).

¹⁹ Manigart (2005: 570-582).

²⁰ Manigart (2005: 570-572).

²¹ For a fuller discussion on this topic see Connor (2002). See also Gilchrist (1997). For a discussion of the importance of pay and conditions for Australians soldiers in World War One, see Wise (2014).

feature of a functioning defence force. Many of the people who willingly join the military primarily do so for occupational reasons, and of those who join for institutional reasons, this often involves things like teamwork, adventure and military life, rather than, or at least as well as, patriotism and national cultural identification. Where motivation appears patriotic, it may commonly not be nationalist, and may simply be about service in general.

One final objection may relate to the diminished capability of an ‘occupational’ defence force. That is, if the military simply contains people treating it as ‘just another job’, while it may be able to attract and keep recruits, they may not be sufficiently motivated to take the sorts of risks required to win battles, and are likely ‘to reconsider whether the rewards and benefits they receive in the short-term outweigh the sacrifices they are expected to make’.²² Effective military service requires the following of orders which may endanger life, limb, and mental health, and on this objection, the transactional thinking which seems part of occupational motivations may not be enough to prove an effective form of national defence.

But those who think that this playing down of national affiliation will render the military less potent (who is willing to die for a civic ideal or good pay and conditions?) may have been a little hoodwinked. If one actually reads or listens to virtually any of a particular country’s first-person ‘heroic’ war accounts – and certainly not their third-person retelling by zealous public figures – the hero usually does not say ‘I stormed the battlefield because my passion for my country was high’, but something more like, ‘I did it for my mates – they were in trouble and I just went out to help them’. It is no surprise, then, that military combat training is all about the team and bonding them as tightly as possible – and it would seem that it is this post-recruitment *team* identification that really matters.

Moreover, we do have good real-world examples of military institutions where national identification appears to play virtually no role. Private military contractors are the modern-day mercenaries.²³ In the recent Iraq war, for example, as many as 20 000 of these guns-for-hire were operative - roughly equal to the number of national armed forces personnel provided by all of the US’s coalition partners combined.²⁴ The fact that private military contractors treat their work like a job and are motivated by material self-interest has not made them militarily ineffective. Private contractors have been behind some of the most decisive military victories in recent memory. Take, for example, the success of Executive Outcomes, a South African private military firm, in Sierra Leone. The civil war in that country had been raging for four years with no end in sight, and the Revolutionary United Front had gained the upper hand against the national armed forces. This changed after the government enlisted the help of Executive Outcomes. In less than two years they managed to secure Freetown, oust the rebels from the capital’s periphery, and destroy their headquarters. Before long a peace agreement was signed and democratic elections followed.²⁵ In the course of the operation, Executive Outcomes employees took risks and made sacrifices comparable to those that earn

²² Williamson, O’Donnell and Shingles (2015: 4).

²³ Balint and Dobos (2015).

²⁴ Singer (2005).

²⁵ Hough (2007: 9).

national soldiers medals of honour.²⁶ So while operational effectiveness and national identification may be linked, as Executive Outcomes demonstrates operational effectiveness does not require national identification.

Summary: Important social projects, including national defence, can be achieved without government support for a common national culture. Militaries, including Australia's, provide sound evidence for this claim.

Finally, there is one more things worth highlighting about the the relationship between national identity and support for common projects. Many long-time and 'born here' citizens with strong national cultural identification can be reluctant to support welfare redistribution or to help with national defence – their formal allegiance to the state and identification does not have the necessary consequence for actual allegiance to its particular projects. On the other hand, there are citizens with weak national identification who are more than willing to support welfare redistribution and to join the military. It seems national cultural identity is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the support of these projects.

3. Recommendation

Worries about national cultural identification, particularly from government agencies, should be treated with caution. Citizens can support and sustain important institutions – including welfare distribution and national defence – without national cultural identification.

²⁶ Fitzsimmons (2013: 262).

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