
Submission to Senate Inquiry on Nationhood, National identity and Democracy

Introduction and Background

We are historians in the School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry at The University of Queensland. Associate Professor Martin Crotty teaches Australian history, including a course on Australians at War, and researches on Australians and the impacts of war. Associate Professor Lisa Featherstone teaches Australian history and the history of sexuality, and researches on crime and violence. Dr Geoff Ginn teaches Modern British history and Australian public history, and researches on cities, philanthropy and the history of religion.

As academic historians, we are frequently involved in debates over Australian ideas of nationhood and national identity. In our academic roles as teachers, researchers and commentators we have been targets in Australian “culture wars” and “history wars”. More moderate critics suggest that we pay insufficient attention to the positive aspects of Australian history, particularly the beneficent aspects of its British colonisation. At the more extreme ends of the spectrum, we are accused of diminishing the West, undermining pride in Australia, and promoting sectionalism and division.

While we reject such accusations, our task here is not to prolong this kind of polarising debate. Instead, we hope that our submission will be useful to the Senate as we briefly outline what we seek to do as historians, and why. In particular, we seek to provide the Senate with reassurance about the state of Australian history teaching in universities, the purposes and methods of its practitioners, and the public effect. *In short, there is nothing to fear from more diverse histories.*

Our Role and Responsibility as Teachers

We seek to establish a critical dialogue about Australia’s past, with a global perspective. With our students, and in our own research, we encourage critical analysis, examination of the evidence, reasoned argument, and ongoing debate.

History at universities is often caricatured a hotbed of ‘identity politics’, hostile to mainstream social norms and intent on a leftist critique of all systems of authority. We can reassure the Senate that this is not the case. Rather, we aim to teach our students to think critically for themselves, to investigate the evidence and formulate their own ideas about complicated social, political, cultural and economic problems within Australia, and beyond.

Contrary to some commentary, what many call “the Western canon” remains central to how we understand the world, and what we teach. In 2015 and again in 2017 the Institute of Public Affairs undertook a cursory and methodically flawed survey of Australian History courses and concluded that it was dominated by boutique and identity-type courses focussing on topics such as sexuality, gender and race.

However, a much more detailed study into Australian curriculum by Martin Crotty and Paul Sendziuk, which examined all History courses taught in all Australian universities in 2015 and 2016, and which considered enrolment numbers, concluded that the most popular courses, both in terms of university offerings and student numbers, were in the traditional areas of European History, World History, War and Society and Australian History. Courses focussed exclusively on topics such as sexuality, imperialism/colonialism, and popular culture ranked much lower.¹ The “Western canon” survives and thrives in Australian history teaching.

We do, however, readily and enthusiastically integrate other perspectives into that canon. An Australian history course looks very different to what it did fifty years ago, largely because Australia looks very different to what it did in the middle parts of the twentieth century. Students are growing up and engaging in a vastly different country and vastly different and more interconnected world, with changing values about race, ethnicity, sex and gender.

Young people have globalised perspectives on the world, and as they proceed through their lives as citizens, they need to comprehend the worldviews and experiences of people from different backgrounds to their own. To teach them a narrower and more insular history would be to do them a disservice, by leaving them ill-equipped for their employment futures and for their civic responsibilities.

Diversity and Cohesion

We believe that the controversy about national identity and nationhood is an overstated problem. In particular, we suggest, the positing of diversity and cohesion as opposites is problematic, and indeed false. Australians inhabit spaces where they experience, understand and respect multiple levels of identity. A citizen might understand herself as a Queenslander and an Australian, for instance, as well as a Catholic and a feminist. We see no reason why people’s ethnic, sexual, religious, gender or other identities cannot

¹ For a summary, see Paul Sendziuk and Martin Crotty. “‘Identity politics’ have not taken over university history courses”, *The Conversation*, October 20 2017. <https://theconversation.com/identity-politics-have-not-taken-over-university-history-courses-85972>

happily co-exist with regional, national and other identities. Plural identities no longer challenge contemporary ideas of national identity or the nation state.

To the contrary, we see understanding and acceptance of difference, diversity and multiple identities as *reinforcing* of social cohesion. The key to social cohesion and national identity is the acceptance and accommodation of difference and diversity, as opposed to their denial or suppression.

Historically, we can see that national identity is always in flux and changing. This is not new: globalisation has been a process since the 1500s. We agree that the nation state must balance domestic imperatives (including acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and seeking to close the gap on many indicators of wellbeing) with our international obligations. We face problems that require global solutions, from climate change to people trafficking. The challenges before our students are not insular or bordered by the concept of the nation state. They therefore need to understand their own nation and their own culture, but also other cultures, peoples and countries if they are going to be productive and well-informed global and national citizens.

Australians need to look open-mindedly towards sophisticated and complex solutions, grounded in knowledge of global politics and growing interdependence. Global collective action will be at the core of solving existing and future problems: as an inclusive democracy Australia is well placed to take a lead in this, through the ethical execution of our global citizenship.

To do so, we encourage broader and more generous discussion about national identity and our diverse, shared histories. Right now, we particularly need acceptance and accommodation of our shared humanity. This, we argue, will help lead to social cohesion for all Australians.

Please do not hesitate to contact us for any further thoughts,

Yours,

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