

# Empty Values: The Australian Concept of Citizenship

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Region: [Oceania](#)

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*It has been a lowering conversation, and one that Australia's politicians have been engaging in with various degrees of discomfort. The Australian prime minister, for one, doesn't seem to know where to place his feet on this one, showing considerable trouble in navigating the term "Australian values" before probing questions.*

Would such values, posed Leigh Sales of the ABC to the squirming Malcolm Turnbull, include those traditionalists celebrating Hanukkah? Could you still pass muster as an Australian wearing the headscarf? "Of course!" retorted a clearly exasperated prime minister.

Left stranded on high ground, Turnbull has had to propose a kindergarten list of what those values would look like: "respect, the rule of law, commitment to freedom, democracy." [1] His colourful deputy, Barnaby Joyce, adds the "fair go" and a form of attire: shorts.

The topic of "Australian values" need never have arisen, given the sheer paucity of detail as to what they entail, but the Turnbull government is that desperate for electoral mileage it is liable to politicise the air if it senses a chance for survival. Political desperation is palpable, and can either place you into a coma of boredom or befuddle the strategists.

To that end, proposals that may never make it to the bureaucrat's desk have been spun suggesting that the Australian citizenship test incorporate a greater component of "Australian values". Highly problematic to begin with, it is a chance for committees and challenged experts to concoct an arbitrary list of what, exactly, these might be.

The absurdity of the suggestion becomes clearer on an examination of some proposed values potential candidates for citizenship will be queried upon. Would you, for instance, gleefully approve the practice of genital mutilation? Would you have been involved or propose to engage in acts of genocide?

This meaningless debate tends to spike when the emotional barometer is jarred on special occasions. When that great, murderous folly known as Anzac Day finds expression in marches and rum-laced milk in the morning, a call is made to refine the nature of those values and apply them to prospective Australians.



One Australian MP with much time on his hands, Andrew Laming, has gone so far this year as to argue that a new national anthem should reflect those “values”. At the very least, there should be a new verse reflecting “our jocular sense of humour”, how we “come from blends of many backgrounds”, and how Australia is “a young nation”.<sup>[2]</sup> (Presumably, when longer in the tooth, the Australian state would have to find a new verse.)

The social psychologist fraternity has also made efforts to identify what it terms “cultural values”, though treating these as objective indicators of anything can be problematic. Shalom Schwartz has a stab at a finite number, coming up with seven dimensions or orientations: harmony, embeddedness, hierarchy, mastery, affective autonomy, intellectual autonomy and egalitarianism.<sup>[3]</sup>

Unsurprisingly, there are two that stand out for the pundits: that of embeddedness, where the whole is valued more than the individual; and autonomy, which is pretty straight forward in its individualistic suggestiveness. Schwartz’s work is praised to the heavens as being “the outcome of decades of empirical research around the globe.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Playing around in such academic undergrowth enables Professor Nick Haslam of University of Melbourne to suggest that Australia is far from distinctive, let alone exceptional its paraded values. By the metric of how far Australia deviates “from the international average over seven dimensions”, the seekers of exceptionalism will be disappointed. Australia “is the second *least* distinctive culture of all, beaten to the gold medal by Brazil” (*The Conversation*, May 1).

The debate has also provoked some much needed satire. Ben Pobije insists that the PM and his colleagues have missed the key points. One is the “gift of the nature strip”, the innate Australian tendency to recycle appliances and items abandoned on the grass in front of a house.

“Council regulations might say otherwise, but the freedom to gather up strangers’ garbage whenever opportunity knocks is a vital Australian value and one we do well to safeguard.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Pobije suggests other value indicators that could be codified: a deep suspicion of the imagination, a latent anti-Americanism despite surface affection for those from the land of the free, and any chance “to take a day off from work for literally any reason.”

Unfortunately, this particular issue tends to be less one to satirise than one to observe with mute insensibility. This is bound to lead to humbug, where values become less a matter of virtue than sin, a facile and shallow assertion of crude patriotism. As a letter to *The Age* put it,

“It might be hard to wax lyrical about our treatment of asylum seekers, the reduction in foreign aid or the growing divide between rich and poor, for example.”[6]

On the point of values, take your pick.

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#### Notes

[1]

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-20/migrants-to-face-tougher-tests-for-australian-citizenship/8456392>

[2]

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/coalition-mp-andrew-laming-calls-for-new-national-anthem-verse-to-reflect-australian-values-20170425-gvs49l.html>

[3] <http://kodu.ut.ee/~cect/teoreetiline%20seminar%2023.04.2013/Schwartz%202006.pdf>

[4]

<http://theconversation.com/australian-values-are-hardly-unique-when-compared-to-other-cultures-76917>

[5] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-28/these-are-our-core-australian-values/8476902>

[6]

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/smh-letters/plenty-of-suggestions-for-australian-values-addition-to-anthem-20170426-gvsk8e.html>

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