



the middle
ground

THEME 5 RESEARCH PAPER

“LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT”



Photo Credit: Getty Images

1. KEY MESSAGES (EXECUTIVE SUMMARY)

- The phrase ‘love it or leave it’ has featured often in Australian public discussions and have been used as a way to alienate minority groups often making valid criticisms about aspects of Australian culture and policy
- Australian values have long been a weapon to exclude refugees from entering the country
- Australian values have often been quite vaguely defined. It is arbitrary to discriminate on the basis of these values
- Australia’s multicultural history must be appreciated to understand what true Australian values look like and what individuals can realistically be accounted for
- The current discourse needs to change as it excludes and marginalises entire minorities and has compounded existing oppression such as Islamophobia and more

SETTING THE SCENE: “OUR VALUES” AT RISK?

Australian values have often been the centrepiece of many discussions around nationhood, immigration and multiculturalism. They have often served a determinative function in who gets accepted into the country, refugee policy as well as the broader socio-cultural atmosphere and tensions within Australia. Individuals who don't respect or appreciate these values, are often hurled with insidious slogans and in popular jargon, told that they should “Love it or Leave it”. This discussion however, is laced with assumptions around what Australian values actually are - and whether this elusive concept is credible enough to inform national sentiment around wide ranging policy discussions. Dissecting this discussion is important as it has major implications for the wellbeing (and sometimes the lives) of minority groups in Australia. It is on the backdrop of this politically charged environment where the theme of ‘Love it or Leave it’, the fifth in The Middle Ground project, seeks to further the national conversation.

Currently, visitors and new residents to Australia need to read through an “Australian values statement” from the ‘Life in Australia Book’ as published on the Home Affairs Website. Following this, they need to sign and accept the Australian values statement which advocates for the ‘respect for freedom and dignity of the individual, freedom of religion, commitment to the rule of law, Parliamentary democracy, equality of men and women ...’.

Leaving aside how this approach of confirming cultural values through a signature may be quite ineffective, it recalls a history of anxiety within mainstream Australian discourse around a belligerent and backward immigrant.

Following the controversial Cronulla Riots, Prime Minister John Howard reminded us of “Australia’s dominant cultural pattern” which was comprised of “...Judeo-Christian ethics, the progressive spirit of the Enlightenment and the institutions and values of British political culture”. Howard made it mandatory for all migrants, Refugees and long term visitors to read about Australian values, memorize them, promise to live by them by signing the Australian values statement and to respond to mandatory questions in order to pass the citizenship test. The Rudd government repackaged this and transformed it into ‘principles and responsibilities’ that were embedded in the citizenship pledge.

Large media outlets have also had a tremendous impact on the contestation of Australian values.



Rupert Murdoch is the Australian-born American media mogul who founded News Corp - a right wing news corporation with multiple different brands. Murdoch

has had considerable sway in pushing a particular (exclusive) view of Australian values

Extremely influential media mogul Rupert Murdoch, in an address at the Lowy Institute, defines Australian values as a medley basket of things such as competitiveness, a fair share for all and egalitarian meritocracy.

Murdoch pushes Australians to carve out a position of influence in the global arena through latching on to these values and thereby innovating economically and enhancing its competitiveness.

Not only have these cultural and supposed value differences been the subject of excluding individuals from entering into Australia from an immigration context, but they have also shaped what an acceptable existence for immigrants looks like. Many a time, respecting Australian values becomes a polite way of denying immigrants the ability to participate in discussions of wider society and adopt a critical stance. This approach - while appalling - is entrenched in a deep history of Australia's race problem as it manifested in the White Australia policy in the 1900s. Whilst then explicit skin colour was used to control Australian borders, now this set of abstract 'values' achieves the same objective. In an article by the Spectator, Arthur Chrenkoff frustratingly writes about these critical immigrants

“You know that you are not imprisoned and kept by force where you are, don't you? If you really so passionately dislike just about everything about your country, you have to ask yourself a question – why suffer? Why keep putting yourself through this endless unhealthy rage and frustration? There are many different types of societies around the world, some of which are without doubt a lot closer to your vision of what an ideal community should be like. Wouldn't you be happier living somewhere else?”

The frustration within this quote captures the anxiety of mainstream society towards a questioning and critical immigrant. What is problematic about this attitude is that it fails to be Australian on its own terms. It is fundamentally undemocratic to assert that minorities should simply leave the country if they do not comply with the majority of the populace. Another aspect of the drive to a homogenous set of Australian values and identity is to serve the function of reassuring “real” Australians that their way of life is safe from terrorists, queue jumpers and men who don't respect women. It refers to an image of Australian glory, progress and stability and the values that are necessary to maintain this glory.



WHAT ARE AUSTRALIAN VALUES BEYOND THE HEADLINES?

In looking at the characteristics of Australian values by the commentators and politicians above, it seems that these mentions of 'egalitarianism' and 'responsibility' are extremely broad and almost esoteric concepts. Given most humans across the globe would attest to the need for equality and treating

people well, it would seem strange that not only are these values enshrined as national values, but that individuals are excluded from sharing Australian culture or coming into Australia on the basis of these values.

What is interesting is that these articulations of what Australian values are and should be, often derive from conservative white society and are often clearly politically loaded. For instance, part of Australian values is for 'men to respect women' - a seemingly innocent remark on the need for gender respect. However, in the context of anxieties over 'backward immigrants' who oppress women and dictate their clothing and movements, it is clear that this aspect of Australian identity is racialised and constructed in response to a perceived threat.

However, a movement beyond a racialised and politicised definition of Australian values requires an appreciation of Australia's multicultural makeup.

One in four of Australia's 22 million people were born overseas, 46% with at least one parent born overseas and nearly 20 per cent of Australians speak a language other than English at home.

Considering this reality, it is difficult to assert a unified set of Australian values which, in the first instance, assume that a unified Australian identity exists in the first place. If immigrants create a sizeable part of Australia (namely 1 in 4), then the question arises as to what delegitimizes the values of these individuals at the expense of other - seemingly ill defined and ambiguous - Australian values.



A festival in South Australia which recalls the multicultural nature of Australian values. Any conversation around values must pay tribute and acknowledge Australia's multiculturalism

Furthermore, Australia has a history of immigration which indicates that a homogenous Australian 'culture' has not existed historically. Australian culture, and by extension its values, has always been a mosaic of different cultures and ways of thinking. Indeed this trend was set in motion by the settler British themselves, followed by swathes of immigrants during the 1851 gold rush (from Britain, Ireland, China, the US) and eventually from all over the world following the second world war. Each group contributed what would go on to become a significant part of Australian culture. It is clear that Australian values are not a static field whereby people choose to 'love it or leave it', but rather that Australian values themselves are constantly evolving and fluctuating based on different immigration shocks and trends.

An interesting manifestation of this debate in the public square was the controversy around the Woolworths Aussie flag with the words "If you don't love it, leave". Jonathon Green astutely summarises this component of the discussion "The real issue is not so much the threat of eviction, but the sense of certainty behind the definition of "it" ... this country, us. What and where is this Australia we must either love or leave? Presumably it's not the

almost unconsciously tolerant, effusively multicultural, free, liberal and accepting reality ... real crime, quite possibly, is both the appropriation of the very idea of Australia and the empowering of the splinter of the population holding that view with the right to decide who should stay and who should go”



An Aussie flag singlet sold at 2 Woolworths which became the seat of controversy and public discussion

Photo: Twitter - George Craig

Further, it should be noted that holding individuals account to Australian values only takes place with respect to immigrants. White Australia has never been accounted for not complying with this set of abstract values. It seems that Australian values is almost a code word for ‘what are the justifications that we can use to keep certain groups of people out of the country’ and ‘what are the conditions we will place on those who make it into the country’. Hence, the push for Australian values has been beset by an ignorance of Australia’s multicultural reality but also the hypocrisy and racialisation of its own articulation.

THE NEED FOR CHANGE: MOVING BEYOND A POLARISING DISCOURSE

Whilst these complexities inherent within a multicultural society should call for circumspect and nuance, the national conversation as

of late has instead been characterised by polarisation and misinformation. Tropes of a values affirming native citizen has been placed in contest with the image of a ‘shady migrant’ seeking to quietly import their own country’s values into Australia. These tropes have made it difficult for the conversation to progress any further and for real workable solutions to be entertained.



Pauline Hanson and the One Nation party have been a significant voice demonising immigrants since the 1990s

Photo: AAP

Further, these tropes have deepened the polarity latent within broader society and has pitted minority groups such as Muslims against a growing far right. The ultimatum ‘love it or leave it’ reflects this conflict as it sees no complex solution to an otherwise complex problem: the only solution is to either love it (as the ‘good’ migrant does) or leave it (as the politically conscious and critical migrant does).

There have been significant racialised tragedies that have hit Australian society and neighbouring countries in recent times that recall this social conflict arising from a clash of cultures.

These have included recurring attacks at places of worship, culminating in the very

recent and horrific mosque attacks in New Zealand by an Australian man identified as a white supremacist. These attacks are targeted at minorities like Muslims - comprising migrants and refugees - by self-proclaimed anti-immigrant crusaders adhering to dangerous ideologies, such as white supremacy or right-wing extremism. Even in a post Christchurch world, some have paid tribute to the shooter's motives and have attempted similar atrocities - such as the Holland Park Mosque attempt in Brisbane.



While protectiveness over Australian values may come from genuine concern, it manifests itself in a toxic form of hatred and vitriol

Photo: Shutterstock / Dave Hewison
Photography

The New Zealand mosque attacks, Quebec mosque attacks (mentioned in Essay 1) and other anti-immigrant and racially-fuelled tragedies of recent times demonstrate that racial tension and the climate of Islamophobia are on the rise.

Further, recent Anti Semitic incidents in Melbourne schools have indicated the racialised and polarised environment that many minorities are facing in today's Australia. If we are to avoid further insecurity and tension

building up within society, it is crucial to change how we perceive and discuss migration in general, and ensure we are not on the wrong side of the debate when it comes to excluding migrants from the nation due to a perceived difference in values. For example, we need to ask ourselves about the type of language and labels that are being used in the media and various political actors which have the effect of marginalising entire groups due to a perceived lack of 'Australian values' and thereby a sense of foreignness.

CONCLUSION: MOVING TOWARDS RESPECT FOR ALL

Hence, it is clear that the existing polarising discourse has had wide ranging impacts on immigrants and has fundamentally shaped their experience in living in Australia. The discussion around Australian values has determined who gains entry into Australia (through citizenship tests) as well as who bears the brunt of national scrutiny and vitriol. This has also meant that key minority groups have struggled to contribute in meaningful ways to any national conversation if they disagree with mainstream opinion. For immigrants, this has meant that they are ungrateful to and disliking of Australian values and culture and hence are viewed with distrust (and hate) by much of the mainstream.

It is in this context where ultimatums such as 'love it or leave it' operate. However, a closer view at what Australian values alongside a deeper analysis of our history of multiculturalism, it is clear that a singular homogenous Australian identity is difficult to articulate, let alone discriminate by. Attempts at articulation - both by politicians and media outlets - have often been extremely ambiguous and have had severe political

undertones to the extent where they serve no function but to discriminate.

The national conversation should move beyond the 'clash of values' narrative and take the multicultural nature of Australian society more seriously. Minorities and immigrants have never tried to seriously upend the 'Australian way of life' but have simply asked for respect and an ability to exercise the freedoms which Australian society enshrines in its law. Ultimately, Australian values have been weaponized as a method of exclusion by mainstream society towards its minorities and should take on a more heterogeneous and multicultural definition. the 'clash of values' narrative and take the multicultural nature of Australian society more seriously. Minorities and immigrants have never tried to seriously upend the 'Australian way of life' but have simply asked for respect and an ability to exercise the freedoms which Australian society enshrines in its law. Ultimately, Australian values have been weaponized as a method of exclusion by mainstream society towards its minorities and should take on a more heterogeneous and multicultural definition.