

'Team Australia' threatens the majority, too

David Stephens

Team Australia rhetoric comes down to who is in and who is out. 'My experience of Australia as a kid', [Irfan Yusuf recalled](#), 'was that it was a nation of bullies trying to protect their turf from anyone they perceived as outsiders'. Minorities were 'bludgeoned' into conformity or marginalised.

Irfan Yusuf was born in Pakistan and came to Australia as a child. From my point of view, sometimes it seems as if not much has changed since the 1970s of Yusuf's childhood. At the official level, it is as if the rhetoric of 'border protection' is being applied to a concept of Australian-ness as well as to the country, Australia.

But 'beating the bounds' exercises also offer comfort and send signals to those who tread the national home ground. They are directed at 'us' as well as at 'them'. Politicians manipulate the symbols effortlessly. The world is divided into those who wear burqas and those who do not, those who would travel overseas to be 'foreign fighters' and those who fear what such people will do when they come back to Australia.

The manipulation, in other words, is not only to intimidate the minority but also to ensure solidarity among the majority. Scapegoating of minorities to unite the majority is [a time-honoured technique of fascist regimes](#), as is suppression of human rights because of a perceived greater need ('security'). Because fascist techniques have been associated in the past with dictatorships and anti-democratic regimes does not preclude them existing in ostensibly democratic countries as well.

One way of manipulating the majority is to push patriotic buttons. Honest History [reported earlier this year](#) an incident where coalition federal MP, former Brigadier Andrew Nikolic, accused the ABC of lacking 'situational awareness' when it broadcast a launch of the Honest History website. In typical national broadcaster fashion, the segment was very balanced – there was an interview with the national president of the RSL as well as references to the less admirable parts of the Anzac story, like soldiers getting venereal disease. Ignoring the attempt at balance, Brigadier Nikolic believed it was poor form to 'question Gallipoli's place in our history' during the centenary of World War I.

Brigadier Nikolic's remark came just before Prime Minister Abbott [complained](#) that the ABC lacked 'basic affection for the home team'. A month later, a very senior official – a man with a proprietary interest in war commemoration – accused Honest History itself of 'lacking situational awareness' and of 'not being a force for good'.

We wondered whether a memorandum had gone around Canberra regarding 'situational awareness'. We found it was a military term to do with being aware of one's surroundings. In the current context, though, it is more accurately rendered as 'pipe down, pull your head in and let the rest of us get on with some patriotic exercises'. Of which there will be plenty, with hundreds of commemorative events and projects costing at least \$300 million over the next four years.

Anzac has been described as 'the third rail' of Australian politics – touch it, one gets electrocuted – or as 'a sacred cow'. We have seen school teachers, university academics and even pseudonymous commenters on blogs express nervousness about being seen to question the prevailing view on Anzac, to break the Anzac 'taboo'. People sometimes giggle nervously when we skewer what we call '[Anzackery](#)', overblown, sentimental, jingoistic rhetoric, often with a political or commercial purpose. Writers analysing Anzac receive hate mail.

Having the correct attitude to Anzac is a Team Australia loyalty test. Questions about Anzac feature in the [citizenship material of the Immigration Department](#). There are other conformity indicators, too. Some behaviours are called 'un-Australian'; others score an 'Aussie, Aussie, Aussie' seal of approval. Prime Minister Abbott felt it necessary [to describe](#) the opposition leader as 'an Australian patriot'. When the ABC's Emma Alberici argued last month with Wassim Doureihi from the Hizb ut-Tahrir group, [the Prime Minister said](#), 'I think she spoke for our country last night', as if national honour was somehow at stake on tabloid television.

Commemorative occasions impose a particular sort of conformity. When the ABC aired allegations about a massacre by Australian soldiers following the Battle of Bitia Paka in then German New Guinea in August 1914, the [Minister for the Centenary of Anzac, Senator Ronaldson, said](#) the timing of the broadcast was insensitive because some (distant) relatives of the Australian soldiers also killed at Bitia Paka were attending a centenary ceremony.

Given that commemoration will be virtually continuous over the next four years, charges of insensitivity are likely to recur. Situational awareness will be at a premium. Successive commemorative occasions will provoke remarks about the links between the Anzacs then and our Diggers now. [The speech of former Prime Minister Howard](#) on Remembrance Day was a good example. The soldiers and airmen going to Iraq this time around, said Howard, 'stand on the shoulders of their Anzac forebears and they carry in their mission the same values of this country as did their forebears'. (It's appropriate to have Howard popping up this year in a semi-official capacity; Team Australia [smacks of his simple nostrums](#).)

There will be an implication – sometimes spelt out explicitly – that questioning the Iraq commitment (or the Syrian commitment, if it occurs) is not only disloyal to our handful of personnel there but to their fighting fathers and grandfathers. Even beat-ups like ['the Russians are coming'](#) will play their part. The impulse in a fearful populace to 'circle the wagons' is not necessarily proportionate to the reality of the threat. Even confected threats gain a momentum of their own and put dissenters under pressure to go along.

'Now is when we find out what Team Australia really means', [Waleed Aly](#) said of the moves to ban the burqa. 'Now is when we discover if [Team Australia is] designed to unify a diverse nation or to demonise the socially unpopular.' In fact, Team Australia is about *both* dog whistling for the majority and aggression towards minorities. Making insiders feel safe and comfortable is the other side of ensuring that outsiders feel rejected.

David Stephens is secretary of [Honest History](#), a coalition of historians and others seeking the balanced presentation and use of Australian history during the centenary of Anzac. He does not necessarily represent the views of all supporters of Honest History.