



30 September 2019

Senator the Hon Kim Carr
Chair
The Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Senator

INQUIRY INTO NATIONHOOD, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND DEMOCRACY

On behalf of Charles Sturt University, I am pleased to provide this submission to The Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee for your inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy.

Charles Sturt University is Australia's largest regional university, with more than 43,000 students and approximately 2,000 full time equivalent staff. We are a unique multi-campus institution with campuses at Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Canberra, Dubbo, Goulburn, Manly, Orange, Parramatta, Port Macquarie and Wagga Wagga, as well as various study centres located throughout regional and rural south-eastern Australia.

As a university for the public good, Charles Sturt University believes that western liberal values and institutions of nationhood, national identity and democracy provide the fundamental foundations for economic prosperity, social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

Indeed, in what is more often than not a troubled world, the success of the Australian story of nationhood, national identity and democracy provides a beacon of hope for much of humankind. The University's belief in nationhood, national identity and democracy is highlighted on our website home page:

"We are a university of the land and people of our regions. True to the character of regional Australia we have gumption, we have soul and we collaborate with others.

We develop holistic, far-sighted people who help their communities grow and flourish. The Wiradjuri phrase yindyamarra winhanganha means the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in.

This phrase represents who we are at CSU – our ethos. It comes from traditional Indigenous Australian knowledge, but it also speaks to the mission of universities – to develop and spread wisdom to make the world a better place.

Harnessing technology, we thrive as a distributed yet connected community, welcoming and engaging with people across Australia and the world."

From www.csu.edu.au.

Charles Sturt University has prepared this submission for consideration by the Committee in accordance with the *Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy Discussion Paper*, refer https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal_and_Constitutional_Affairs/Nationhood/Discussion_paper and provided for reference at Attachment A.

Democracy under threat

“Some Australians report a growing sense that democracy is under threat. Around the world, voters seem increasingly dissatisfied with how democratic politics works for them. Public trust in democratic institutions is declining. Notions of national identity, which can be the roots of a democratic community, are changing as our world becomes increasingly interconnected. Political divisions appear to be increasing in the face of rapid economic, social and cultural change. These are substantial issues that should concern all citizens, regardless of their political persuasion. The loss of trust in democratic institutions does not only threaten social-democratic parties or other movements that work through these institutions to implement a reformist agenda. Ultimately, these changes have the potential to weaken liberal democracy itself.”

From *Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy Discussion Paper*.

Charles Sturt University generally supports the proposition that there is a growing sense that democracy is under threat and that voters seem increasingly dissatisfied with democratic politics. Stressing the use of the words sense and seem however, it is not clear whether democracy is under threat or is simply responding to change. In Australia, today's economy is simply unrecognisable to the closed, low technology economy of the 1970s. Perhaps our political system is simply responding to the open, high technology society of today. Globally, these changes include:

- The Internet's atomisation of markets from high-barrier “markets of millions” to low-barrier “millions of markets” could result in the two-party political system slowly breaking down (although recent election results in Australia do not support this thesis).
- The ability for virtually all members of society to engage has never been greater and while this opens opportunities for the “wisdom of crowds” it can drive division of experiences, views and opinions and encourage echo chambers of thoughts and thinking which may or may not be based on verifiable evidence (“fake news” be it from the left or right which threatens to undermine the enlightenment foundations of Western wealth of nations).
- The rise of the “anywheres” and “somewheres” phenomenon, that is people connected to virtual community (or ideas) versus those connected to physical community (or place). The long-term impact that this emerging trend has on political expectations and allegiances may be too early to confirm.
- The continued rise of cities as centres of activity for the creative classes, where increasingly serviced-based economic markets place a greater and greater value on innovation, novelty and uniqueness, can drive inequality between highly urbanised environments, outer suburban areas and regional cities, rural towns and remote communities.
- Loss, or perception of loss of personal worth, for example the hollowing-out of manufacturing in the USA (with the election of Trump and emergence of an isolationist US) and subrogation of national powers to multinational organisations (Brexit referendum result and independence narrative in the UK). Australia has been largely immune to these developments, probably because industries associated with our national identity continue to grow (agricultural and mining), and while sharing a head of state with several other nations, we are not a member of any legally-binding supranational body other than the UN and the WTO.



Absorbing the political implications of these global changes is a strain and a test for all systems of government. While authoritarian and totalitarian systems may be able to control such implications in the short term, the course of history demonstrates that ultimately such systems of government fail. Democracy provides the “safety-valve” for citizens to have their say and be heard.

While there may be a growing sense that democracy is under threat and that voters seem increasingly dissatisfied with democratic politics, Charles Sturt University believes that these observations arise from our system of government absorbing and adjusting to these changes. Rather than democracy being under threat and dissatisfaction with politics on the rise our system of government is simply responding to change. As Winston Churchill said:

*“Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, **it has been said** that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time...”*

From Winston Churchill, Primer Minister, House of Commons, United Kingdom, 11 November 1947.

While more incident than trend, it is likely that the finding outlined in the Discussion Paper, “*There is a wealth of evidence showing a worrying decline in the level of public trust. In 2007, 86 per cent of Australians were satisfied with how democracy works in Australia. That figure is now 41 per cent. Just 31 per cent of Australians say they trust the federal government, and the approval rating for politicians is at 21 per cent. Evidence also suggests that those with the lowest incomes are least satisfied with democracy.*” would not be repeated if these studies were undertaken now, as this research corresponded with a period of unprecedented instability in the prime ministership.

However, as Australia’s largest regional university, Charles Sturt University does observe an emerging disenfranchisement that many people in regional, rural and remote feel with policy and politics. And while, there has always been an “us versus them” narrative, the gap between country Australia and our capital cities does not appear to be lessening in terms of economic, social and environmental values and beliefs.

In order to develop and implement strategies and actions to sustain democracy, define nationhood, strengthen the nation state, ensure social cohesion, recognise cultural identity, guarantee that government is fit for purpose and maximise the value of public debate, credible, impartial, evidence-based information will be required for decision making. Charles Sturt University is in a unique position to work with parliaments and governments and fill this research void.

Sustaining democracy

“Some researchers highlight that democratic decline can occur through subtle erosion of democratic norms. Some have also raised the possibility of ‘illiberal democracies’ that, while perhaps enjoying widespread public support, do not respect principles such as the rule of law or separation of powers.”

From *Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy Discussion Paper*.

Sustaining democratic norms and liberal values will require responsive and sustained effort that addresses the challenges of and captures the opportunities of the early 21st Century, including:

1. Ensuring a “common wealth” as politics atomises.
2. Harnessing mass engagement so that the polity develops and “owns” policy, with the confidence of evidence rather than the fear of feel.



3. Finding common ground, through political leadership, between those connected by ideas versus those connected by place.
4. Facilitating the creative milieu of the suburbs, regional cities, rural towns and remote communities so that reward for novelty, uniqueness and innovation is distributed beyond our urban centres.
5. Striving to address the perception of loss of personal worth, and where loss of personal worth arises from technological change that governments invest in skills and knowledge through education and training.

Further, in order to address the emerging disenfranchisement that people in regional, rural and remote Australia feel with policy and politics actions embedded in the effort to solve the issues discussed above, contextualised solutions that recognise the societal differences of and particular issues of our regional cities, rural towns and remote communities where one size does not fit all will be required. Again, credible, impartial, evidence-based information will be required for effective decision making to sustain democracy.

Nationhood and the nation state

“The concept of the nation state has been significant in global development. However, the modern state has been influenced by increasing social, economic, cultural, and political connections between countries. Australia has a rich Indigenous history of over 60,000 years. It also has an important British colonial history from the late 18th century. It has become a diverse multicultural society.”

From Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy Discussion Paper.

Charles Sturt University believes that nationhood and the nation state in Australia, is strong and continues to strengthen despite increasing social, economic, cultural, and political connections between countries. As discussed above, Australia has largely been immune to loss of worth, identity and culture as industries associated with our national identity continue to grow (agricultural and mining), and while sharing a head of state with several other nations, we are not a member of any legally-binding supranational body other than the UN and the WTO.

However, much could be done to strengthen a sense of nationhood and the primacy of the nation state in Australia. Effort on this front is discussed below.

Social cohesion and cultural identity

In many ways we are living in a time of conundrum, with social cohesion and cultural identity being at the centre of this confusion. For example:

- While many decry a loss of freedom of speech, we have never had so much freedom of expression (think public censorship of the 1970s and 80s).
- Others may point to the threat of multiculturalism, however consumer preferences for food and experiences from cultures other than their own continue to surge.
- Although communication technology connects us like never before, it can simultaneously drive us further apart in many ways.

If there is an absence of strong political leadership and sound, evidence-based policy, such confusion and complexity enable divisive culture wars and drives isolationist identity politics.



As a starting point to ensuring social cohesion and recognising cultural identity for the future, members of Australian parliaments must find ways to include that “Australia has a rich Indigenous history of over 60,000 years. It also has an important British colonial history from the late 18th century. It has become a diverse multicultural society.” in our political process and institutional policies. For example, indigenous recognition in the Constitution and inclusion of indigenous culture in the Australian mainstream needs to be achieved while recognising the value of British civil institutions, ensuring we capture the wealth that only a multicultural society can provide.

Charles Sturt University has worked extensively with the Wiradjuri nation to help recover Wiradjuri language and culture and to support the building of a sense of nationhood. We believe this work could serve as an exemplar for work with Indigenous nation groups across Australia.

In his 2018 Hawke Annual Lecture, Stan Grant (Jr) said the aspirations expressed in the Uluru statement brought together the Western philosophy of the Enlightenment and Indigenous people's years-long struggle for justice. He suggested the statement looks at joining the abiding sense of Indigenous sovereignty to the legal and political sovereignty of the Commonwealth at a time when fears were growing that “democracy itself is doomed”, with growing tribalism and focus on the politics of identity. The Uluru Statement From the Heart is an antidote to the divisive politics of identity. It elevates the politics of respect above the politics of resentment. “It asks of Australia's political leaders' vision and courage. It asks much too from Indigenous people. Can we set aside historical grievance? Can we look to civic unity with our fellow Australians, beyond our difference?”

As reported by Fergus Hunter, SMH November 16, 2018.

Ensuring social cohesion and recognising cultural identity, will be crucial to address and ideally reverse emerging disenfranchisement that people in regional, rural and remote Australia feel with policy and politics. In many ways it is ironic, that culture warriors are often the first to play the “them versus us” card increasing the divide between metropolitan and regional Australia. Addressing dog whistles of this nature will require political leadership from our politicians to ensure that regional identity is recognised and valued and not used as a wedge between sections of society.

As discussed above, contextualised solutions are required that recognise the societal differences of particular issues in our regional cities, rural towns and remote communities where one size does not fit all will be required. Again, credible, impartial, evidence-based information will be required for effective decision making to ensure social cohesion and recognise cultural identity across Australia.

Governing in a democracy

Some commentary suggests that declining trust and confidence is driven by a perceived failure of our institutions to uphold promises and deliver outcomes. A recent Australian survey found 'significant appetite' for democratic reform: of 15 proposed reforms, nine received net agreement rates above 50 per cent.”

From Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy Discussion Paper.

Drawing on Churchill's quote above, “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise”, for government by democracy to remain relevant and indeed flourish it must continually improve based on democratic norms and the values of contemporary society. By continually improving our democratic system of government and including the broader community in these improvements (as distinct from vested interests and lobby groups) trust and confidence in our institutions can be regained.

As stated above, the Australian community supports continual improvement of our system of government, “A recent Australian survey found 'significant appetite' for democratic reform: of 15 proposed reforms, nine received net agreement rates above 50 per cent.”



Public debate

As discussed above, the Internet drives the ability of virtually all members of society to engage in ways like never before and while this opens opportunities for the “wisdom of crowds” it can drive balkanisation of experiences, views and opinions and encourage echo chambers of thoughts and thinking which may or may not be based on verifiable evidence. Fake news, which coarsens public debate, is often used to shut down debate by vested interest groups and frequently drives wedges between people with different opinions. This threatens to undermine rational thought and enlightenment.

Politicians must further develop the skills to ensure that public debate is respectful and inclusive and that decisions are based on evidence rather than feel. In the digital age, this will require great skill in communication to ensure decency and respect provide the basis for public debate.

Finally, a strong, vibrant and diverse Fourth Estate or media will be more important than ever to ensure the value of public debate in the digital age. An effective Fourth Estate depends on access to information. Governments must resist temptation to constrain and limit the public’s right to know. Greater transparency of the politics of parliament and the policy of government would address many of the concerns raised in the Discussion Paper regarding sustaining democracy, defining nationhood, strengthening the nation state, ensuring social cohesion, recognising cultural identity, guaranteeing that government is fit for purpose and maximising the value of public debate.

At the same time there is an onus on the media to report more fact and less opinion, a challenge when media budgets for investigative journalism are under threat due to changing media business models brought about by Big Tech.

I would be very pleased to provide further information to the Committee and would be available to provide evidence at any proposed hearings that that Committee may undertake in relation to ensuring the continued success of the Australian story of nationhood, national identity and democracy.

Yours sincerely

Professor Andrew Vann
Vice-Chancellor

