

# The Scourge Of Nationalism In The Modern World: Is There A Non-Hierarchical Solution?

*Les Hoey*

**It aids our understanding of the malaise that afflicts modern societies to recognise that culture (in the anthropological sense) is more fundamental to the human condition than nationalism; the roots of culture are deeply embedded in pre-history. From our present perspective nationalism appeared as a hybrid graft, initially showing great promise, but, like mistletoe on a eucalypt tree, can now be seen as threatening the life of the parent root.**

The nation-state has taken form during the last few thousand years,<sup>1</sup> and in its modern form only during the last few hundred years. In practical terms it seemed to be a unifying principle bonding a number of cultures together. A ruler would emerge from one culture and through coercion and persuasion obtain a form of allegiance from people of other cultures. While this was the background to the emergence of sovereign nations and nation-states, from an individual's perspective it was culture that gave life an underlying coherence, a sense of internal unity and definite shape. Sovereignty was a concept of temporal supremacy and as embodied in the nation or nation-state could only countenance boundaries as a temporary impediment; in the geography of the mind it projected a universal domain. While seeking some coherence to the human condition, those who wielded power pursued a course of domination and oppression which tended to move in the opposite direction.

Following the period from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries when the Renaissance and the Reformation led to the emergence of science and technology, the scene was set for social formations to crystallise as modern nation-states. Communications improved rapidly after the introduction of printing, and individuals became aware of themselves as part of a human society covering a wide geographical area. The industrial revolution was the dynamo which facilitated contact between peoples but which also brought with it the potential to exacerbate conflict.

The social/political movement that

followed the French Revolution claimed as its credo, liberty, equality, fraternity, but shortly after, France projected itself in Europe as an aggressive nation-state which became intent on subduing its neighbours. Europe became a battlefield of contending powers. In the transition from feudal to modern states, the class and power structures were maintained even though various types of government emerged, some labelled as democratic.

When Napoleon strutted on to the world scene as leader of the French nation, his support of the Social Contract, supposedly to recognise the rights of the people, was conditional on the acceptance of the right of the central government to levy taxes and to conscript citizens for military service. Young men were conscripted to fight for emperor and country. The 'operative illusion',<sup>2</sup> projected from the centre of power, was a mystical glorification of the French nation seen in the light of patriotic fervour. Patriotism — my nation above all others — became the supreme virtue of a citizen and was a motivating force that led to the butchery of millions of people. In a sadly ironic twist it came to be believed by many that the spilling of blood on the battlefield confirmed the nobility of patriotism. Because people loved their country they killed and died for it.

But do Napoleon, Bismarck et al and the nations they led, have relevance for us today — particularly for Western democracies? The rulers are different, the citizens are better educated, and there have been shifts in the structural arrangements within

and between nations. That modern nations are violent is witnessed by each nation's internal operations where crime is endemic, and by their external operations where wars are recurrent. There have been over one hundred wars somewhere in the world during the past fifty years. But the pertinent fact about nation-states is that they are specific hierarchical structures that have persisted over long periods. As in much earlier times, modern national leaders project the virtues of a national spirit, and associate this with the necessity to protect the homeland with 'adequate' armaments. Deterrence is the current word our leaders have conjured up to encapsulate the idea of protection and safety against dangers 'out there'. They appear oblivious to the question — what do we do when 'we face the dangers of deterrence which may not deter and defence which cannot defend'?<sup>3</sup>

Military deterrence is, in fact, a fiction which many highly respected and well-intentioned people support, not because it is convincing but because they cannot, or perhaps will not, see any alternative. It is ultimately the belief in the effectiveness of physical force to achieve desirable ends that puts the leaders of modern nations in the same basic mould as the sovereigns of old. They wield the power of their sovereign states with the iron fist of militarism sometimes obscured by a velvet glove of lofty words.

In Australia it is accepted by all major political parties that we must foster a national spirit, we must have the will to maintain strength, to protect ourselves from outside unnamed sources who are spurred on by their own nationalism. This was the common point of agreement which emerged from the immigration and multiculturalism debate of 1988; a spectrum of oppositional political forces found

---

Les Hoey is a co-editor of *Social Alternatives*.

---