**Ask the philosopher**

Tim Soutphommasane

From: [*The Australian*](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/)

January 30 2010

**AUSTRALIA Day has come and gone, but in backyards this weekend I suspect there will be many a barbecue where people will be debating the merits of patriotism.**

There is no question that Australians have become more openly patriotic in recent years.

The evidence is there, from the flags on top of cars to the Southern Cross tattoos and the proliferation of Australian-themed shirts and singlets on our streets.

At its most basic, patriotism refers to a love of one's country.

But that on its own says very little. After all, what do we mean by country? Do we mean a landscape? A culture and history? Or a political community?

And what does it mean to love a country? Does it mean that we must care for it in a very special way? Or does it mean that we must guard the object of our love jealously from criticism, and believe that it must be better than all of its competitors?

How you answer these questions goes a long way towards determining whether patriotism (loving your country) can be distinguished from jingoism (believing in your country's superiority and aggressively imposing your love of it on all others).

Some see no significant difference between the two.

The playwright George Bernard Shaw, for instance, defined patriotism as "your conviction that [your] country is superior to all other countries because you were born in it".

Shaw's sceptical sentiments will resonate with many. A globalised world means that multiple nationalities and allegiances are commonplace. The rise of nationalist backlashes against immigration seems to highlight the dangers that group pride can pose to tolerance and social cohesion.

It would be better, many say, for us to celebrate our common humanity, to become citizens of the world.

There is no doubt that patriotic excess can be dangerous. Yet it is possible to regard patriotism as a civic virtue rather than a jingoistic vice. Admittedly, this requires a number of steps.

First, one needs to conceive of patriotism as tied to one's membership of a political community and historic tradition.

For example, most Australians would agree that what truly defines us are certain democratic values and aspirations: a deep sense of equality, a belief in a fair go, a willingness to help your mates.

Second, patriotism need not mean mindless loyalty or chauvinism. A genuine patriotism involves a special concern for the welfare of your fellow citizens and a belief that they must live up to certain standards.

Sometimes this will in fact require being critical of your compatriots when they fall short, as they inevitably will from time to time.

If we understand patriotism this way in terms of citizenship rather than cultural pride, it can be generous and inclusive. Being patriotic does not have to mean being obnoxious and threatening. Loving Australia can mean wearing your flag on the inside.

But any liberal patriotism requires good citizens to have the courage to stand up for our shared values. As the 19th-century American statesman Carl Schurz put it, "My country, right or wrong: if right, to be kept right; if wrong, to be set right."

We must all try to live up to the very best aspects of our traditions, rather than indulging the very worst.

*Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address:* *philosophercolumn@gmail.com*

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/opinion/ask-the-philosopher/story-e6frg6zo-1225824642066>