

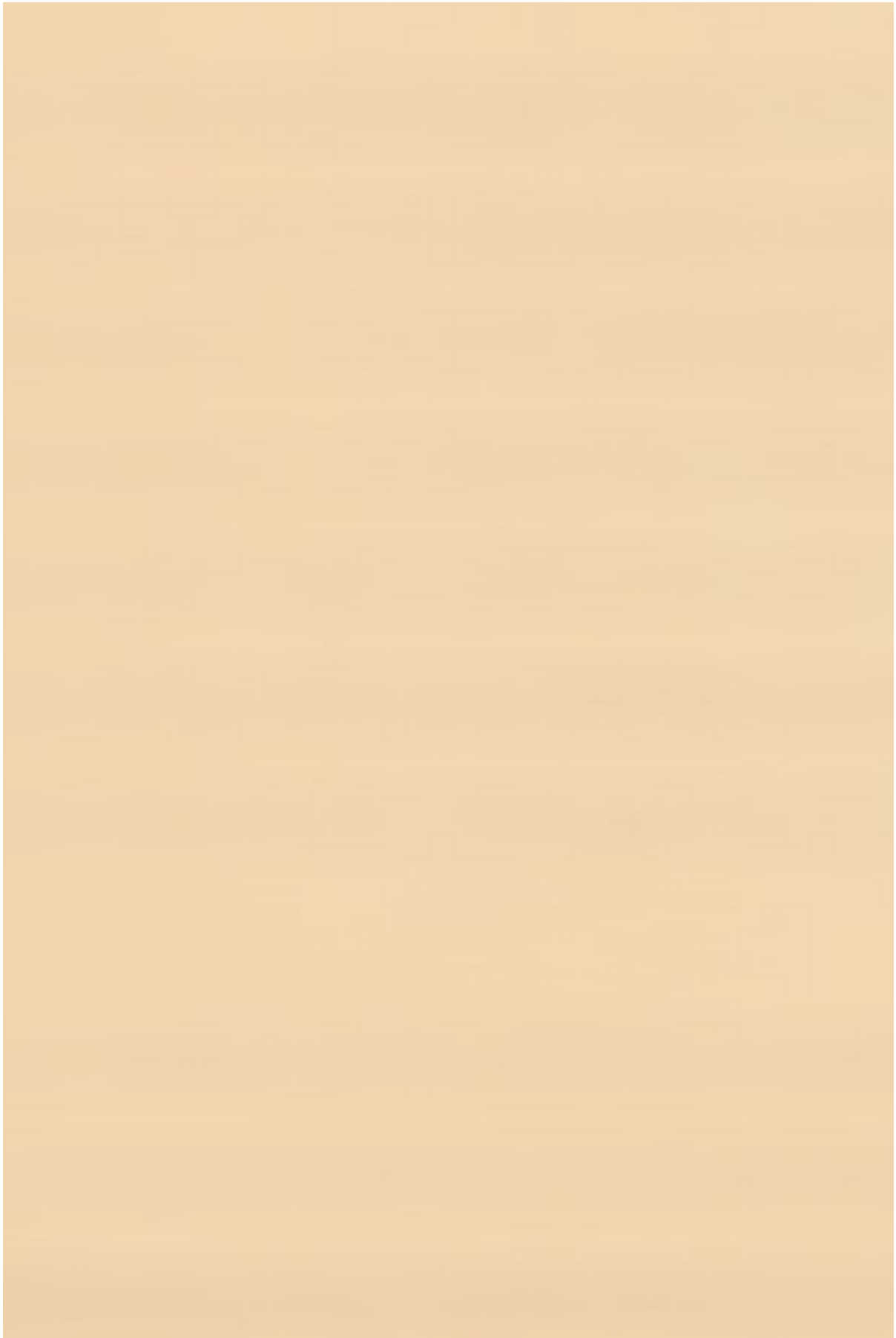
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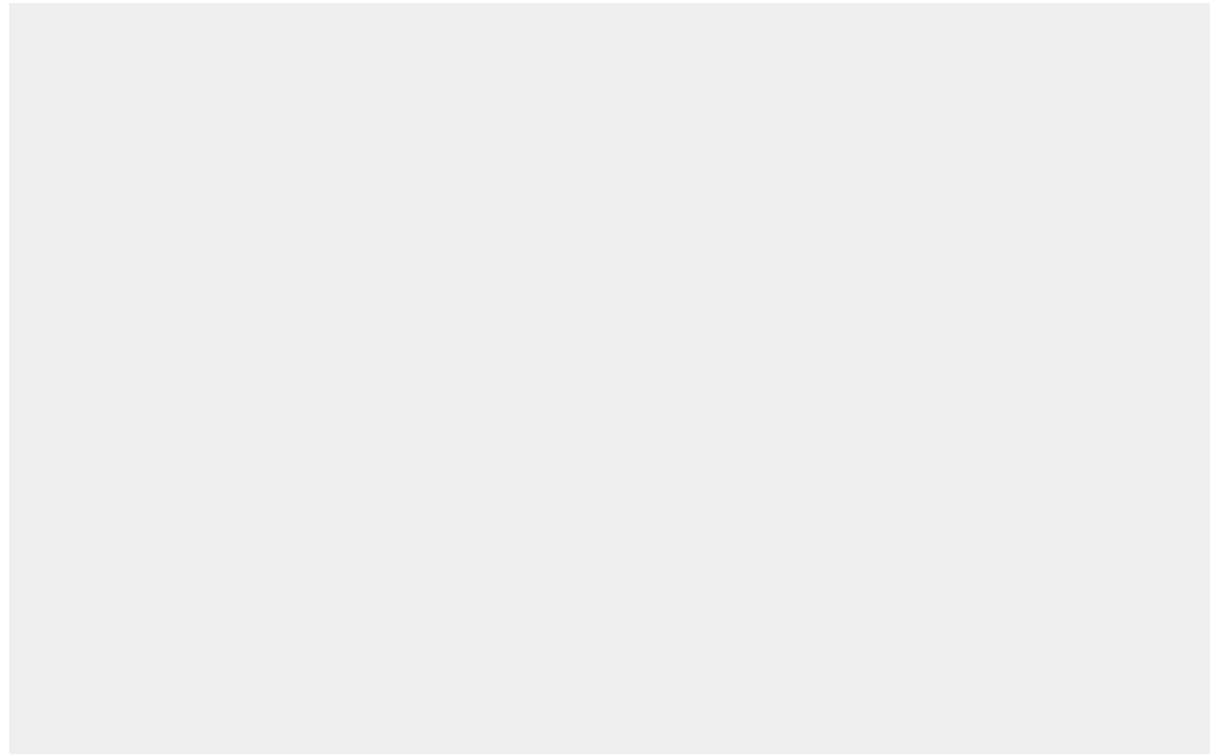
Albanese's new 'progressive patriotism'. Is it more than a vibe?

Mark Kenny : 9-11 minutes : 6/5/2025

In Australia, where overt flag-waving rings hollow and is usually considered tasteless, the word "patriot" feels imported and foreign, ironically. Yet that might be changing.

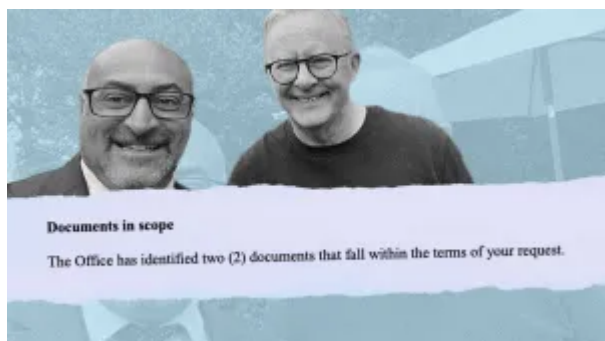
Three years ago, in an essay in *Meanjin* titled "[Towards a new progressive patriotism](#)", I sensed a reclamation project of sorts, in which conservative touchstones like the flag and an openly expressed love of country might be reverse-colonised and uniquely recharged with 65,000 years of continental continuity.





That essay, which pre-dated the damaging 2023 failure of the Voice to Parliament referendum, was pitched into a propitious historical moment — one that seemed to offer a viable path to national healing and a collective reimagining.

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Alas, it wasn't to be.

So why then is Prime Minister Anthony Albanese lighting upon “progressive patriotism” as both a descriptor for existing programs and a driver of second-term priorities? His conjunction is not entirely original, nor widely embraced. Indeed, to the left, it is an oxymoron: “patriotism” being the disreputable turf of reaction and nostalgia.

This linguistic demarcation is most blatant in American politics, where declaring oneself a “patriot” is a common act of contradistinction. Others become traitors by implication, i.e. “woke” cultural elites, internationalists, journalists, academics, people who somehow despise their country.

Donald Trump has called the January 6 insurrectionists “patriots”, his party even refusing to commemorate the law enforcement officers killed and injured defending the Capitol. Two-and-a-half centuries earlier, when British intellectual Samuel Johnson described

patriotism as “the last refuge of the scoundrel”, it was this political valorisation that he opposed.

Populists and their boosters — such as the right-wing campaign vehicle Advance — are increasingly deploying the jingoistic aesthetics of nationalism in their fight against a “lefty” consensus in media, schools and universities, the public service and across professions. Without a hint of self-awareness, their wails of grievance resemble those overseas, usually in Trump’s MAGA movement. Clive Palmer’s risible “Trumpet of Patriots” openly drew on this.

So what then is the prime minister on about? Is his new embrace of “progressive patriotism” merely a crafty label to be cheekily retrofitted to existing Labor policy? Or is it a bold new organising principle for a social-democratic government alive to new possibilities now that it has been resoundingly reelected? Is Albanese’s “progressive” patriotism next-level political spin, or next-level national purpose aimed at genuine social, cultural and civic self-awareness?

Proud progressives?

It is too early to tell, but one reason for caution is that Albanese’s slogan definition seems ethereally broad enough to include universal childcare, affordable housing and strengthened Medicare. In other words, progressive patriotism is already manifest in established programmatic initiatives, some dating back as far as the Hawke Labor government’s universal health insurance scheme.

Nine’s David Crowe positively framed Albanese’s conception as “a riposte to the populist takeover of the White House and the false notion that only conservatives can be proud of their country”. This is a helpful addition, but it remains unclear what the prime minister’s “riposte” amounts to materially in terms of new policy and governmental practice.

Albanese is right to reclaim the notion of nation for the political left, if only because the conservative monopoly on national pride has always been a political fraud — less love of country than nostalgic resistance to social change.

Sky “After Dark” features a nightly procession of right-wing commentators and peripheral MPs bemoaning the sad state of things. Expectorating tirades lament woke teachers indoctrinating our kids, a green-left conspiracy, pious teals, the preferential voting system, falling living standards, rising crime, the ABC, the science of global warming, renewables, unions, etc.

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Conspicuously absent from this fire-hydrant of woe is any discernible affection for contemporary Australia.

Of course, the lexical semantics of political competition dictate that on the other side, virtually everything is evidence of national success and advancement. On election night, a victorious Albanese again brandished his Medicare card, calling it “a declaration of our national values, in our national colours”, which is “not Labor red or Liberal blue, it is green and gold”. Medicare “belongs to all Australians”.

By that reasoning, the progressive variant of patriotism may be as old as Federation and be said to include everything from the eight-hour work day to the secret ballot and universal suffrage.

Questions of sovereignty

Even if we assume Albanese’s “progressive patriotism” is substantive and potentially transformative, threshold questions persist.

For example, how is AUKUS incorporated? Critics of the Anglophone defence pact say its reliance on American nuclear submarines and its inbuilt technological dependence portend the most significant dilution of national sovereignty since World War II.

In Australia’s strategic policy, this interoperability is already exerting a measurable influence. When US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth warned that a rapidly militarising China was rehearsing an invasion of Taiwan, calling on Australia to dramatically step up military spending to 3.5% of GDP, Richard Marles virtually fell over himself in responding.

“What I made clear is that this is a conversation that we are very willing to have, and it is one that we are having,” our defence minister reported of his discussions with Hegseth.

It took Albanese to hose down the sense of undue US compliance, saying, “We’ll determine our defence policy.”

AUKUS critic and director of the Lowy Institute’s International Security Program Sam Roggeveen told SBS the exchange was revealing: “Most of the people making the case for higher defence spending are doing so because they think Australia’s proper role is to supplement America’s capabilities, and that’s why we’re buying nuclear powered submarines, after all.”

Similar concerns over sovereignty appear in Australia’s ultra-tentative approach to recognising Palestinian statehood (which is official ALP policy). Ditto Canberra’s carefully

cloaked criticisms of the far-right Netanyahu government for committing what other democracies, and the International Criminal Court, believe to be war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The common factor here is Australia's observable reluctance to articulate a contrary foreign policy or indeed to depart substantively from America's stance. Palestinian statehood, now being supported by more countries and by former Labor foreign ministers Gareth Evans and Bob Carr, remains off the table. This, even though the denial of statehood has had no inhibitive effect on Middle East violence and serves Israel's interests alone.

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Albanese addresses this conflict only indirectly within progressive patriotism, by arguing Australia's successful multiculturalism works because foreign grievances are not imported here. Yet Australia's multiculturalism, or more particularly its social cohesion, is actually further strained by a one-sided foreign policy that is seen to be unduly influenced.

If progressive patriotism is to amount to more than hollow rhetoric, it must begin with self-assuredness in foreign and defence policy and with material recognition of the crimes of genocide and dispossession committed in Australia's modern settlement.

Former Labor senator Pat Dodson has called on the prime minister to re-engage with Indigenous communities and to deliver the remaining two elements of the Uluru agenda, Makarrata (a national truth-telling commission) and treaty-making.

"They can do that because it doesn't require constitutional referendum. It can be done by way of legislation," he told the ABC.

Albanese had promised on election night 2022 that his government would deliver the Uluru Statement from the Heart "in full". Post-referendum, those other elements have lost momentum. If a new progressive patriotism is to take root, it must be planted in the soil of model social democracy and nourished by the observance of values such as truth, fairness and social justice.

In the end, patriotism refers to how citizens feel about their nation. A reimagined "progressive" Australia faces an enormous psychological barrier if it avoids thinking about how it came about, and how it presents to the world.

What does "progressive patriotism" mean to you?

We want to hear from you. Write to us at letters@crikey.com.au to be published in *Crikey*. Please include your full name. We reserve the right to edit for length and clarity.

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