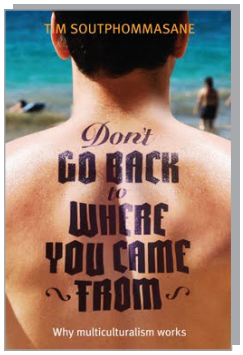
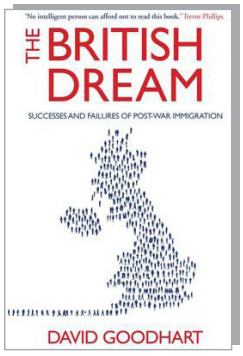


Don't Go Back To Where You Came From: Why Multiculturalism Works
By Tim Soutphommasane
Newsouth, 2012
$29.99, 256 pages
ISBN 9781742233369



The British Dream: Successes and Failures of Post-war Immigration
By David Goodhart
Atlantic Books, 2013
US$20.89, 416 pages
ISBN 9781843548058

In April 2013, ABC Radio National's *Drive* program turned its attention to the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM), also known as 'female circumcision.' FGM is illegal in every state and territory in Australia, and yet it remains a problem due in part to high rates of migration from countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East where the practice is still prevalent. Program host Waleed Aly had attended the recent national summit on FGM where he met Khadija Gbla, a young Muslim woman who spoke about her own experience of the procedure when she was nine years old growing up in Africa. Rather surprisingly, she said the trauma of the procedure was heightened when she migrated to Australia and encountered the Western description of it as 'mutilation.'

Khadija said this term showed a lack of respect and simply served to conjure up horrible images instead of helping people understand the cultural context in which the procedure continues to take place. Rather than use the language of judgment, Khadija felt it was better to 'come from a place of understanding and humbleness … It's about [the perpetrators] and we need to empower them to change.'

But when it comes to FGM (or female circumcision, if you really prefer), what is there to be humble or understanding about? Every Australian parliament has expressed its view about the practice, which almost all people in this country consider barbaric. If we become culturally sensitive to it, we simply make fuzzy the legal and social boundaries of the wider culture of Australian civil society within which, everyday experience tells us, people live harmoniously.

In *Don't Go Back To Where You Came From*, for which he won the Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW Award in the 2013 NSW Premier's Literary Awards, Tim Soutphommasane recognises that those boundaries exist. There are overarching civic values in a liberal democracy, he says, such as the rule of law, the sovereignty of parliament, and a common national language. It is these values that create the wider civic culture in which all Australians live and define 'the limits of an Australian national identity' (p. 27). Indeed, he acknowledges the overwhelming success with which Australia has integrated many generations of immigrants without widespread social disruption.

However, Soutphommasane is also firmly committed to the idea that Australian citizenship need not demand the social and cultural assimilation of an individual. Rather, a reconfigured notion of citizenship affords an individual the opportunity to have some cultural identification, say, as an Italian or an Indonesian. This reconfiguration is marked by a key development in the Australian story when Gough Whitlam's Minister of Immigration, Al Grassby, asserted in a speech in 1973 the role that government has to have in maintaining and fostering diversity.

Soutphommasane regards this commitment to deploy the resources of the state to enforce cultural diversity as a golden moment in our history. From then on, the political landscape was marked out like a grid so that any policy shift could be identified with precision as a development or a deviation. And why not? 'Any social reality of cultural diversity seems to be hollow without there also being a public policy of multiculturalism,' he says. And not just a policy; there needs to be a bureaucracy, too, which now includes the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Australian Multicultural Council (on which Soutphommasane serves), all funded at the expense of the taxpayer 'to ensure that multicultural issues [are] placed at the heart of government policy formation.'

No questioning of this publicly funded policy of multiculturalism can ever be tolerated and it is always seen as an attack. Any reduction in funding to ease the burden on the taxpayer is never less than savage. And nothing provokes the indignation of Soutphommasane and his companion *bien pensants* quite like the impudence of 'mainstream' Australians should they presume to question the moral authority of the sophisticates. The only way to check this miscreant behaviour is for the state to be empowered to act, to reinvent, to correct, and to educate.

Soutphommasane's version of multiculturalism goes well beyond the more neutral sense of the presence within a country of distinct cultural groups. After all, Australia has long comprised many such groups that have lived together, more or less in harmony, enjoying everything this country has to offer. Rather, he says that at the heart of multiculturalism lies the idea of liberal citizenship—by which he seems to mean a form of cultural accommodation by the state—but he finds it hard to define it. The most he can say is that it 'involves some set of group-differentiated rights or policies targeted at minority groups who have traditionally been excluded from the nation state' (p. 49). In his view, this means the state must be called upon to judge the relative values of cultural identities.

> A multicultural state isn't bound by the idea that laws must be applied without any differentiation between members of a community, as a matter of impartiality. After all, to what extent can any state ever be neutral? (p. 50)

wBut of course states are not neutral about values. That's why there are laws banning cultural practices such as FGM. Rather, the state must not differentiate in the application of its laws and norms between different members of the citizenry. Soutphommasane does not agree: 'Fair and equal treatment by the state doesn't mean *identical* treatment' (emphasis in original) (p. 51). This is nonsense, however, and contradicts his earlier claim that the right to express one's culture must be set within the wider context of Australian civic culture, which includes the rule of law.

Since Soutphommasane thinks the presence of racism indicates the amount of work still to be done on our hearts and minds, it is no surprise that he goes off in search of it. For instance, he could have headed the third chapter, 'Is Australia A Racist Country?' instead of 'How Racist Is This Country?' But that is a risky question to ask if one's livelihood as a multiculturalist intellectual depends on a certain answer. Multiculturalism needs racism as its lifeblood, and indeed, one catches a sense of panic in the universities as racism scholars scramble to introduce updated concepts such as 'cultural racism' and the 'new racism.' Racism is now no longer the denial of equal rights but the denial of the right to be different. Whereas it was once thought to determine culture, racism scholars now say race is simply a means of classifying culture.

It's a neat trick. 'Race is now the quality that marks supposedly abhorrent cultural differences,' Soutphommasane explains patiently (p. 88). Do you have a problem with FGM? If you do, you are likely to earn a rebuke from him for an act of 'racialised cultural hostility' involving a negative stereotype of Muslims. Yet Soutphommasane insists that multiculturalism does not entail cultural permissiveness because a right to express one's cultural identity must always respect the rule of law and parliamentary democracy.

But Tim, if I judge a cultural practice to be unacceptable, am I not being a cultural racist? Not so, he says. 'What multiculturalism requires—this is the nuance that isn't always understood—is that any refusal is done in the right way' (p. 94)—that is, through a process of collective dialogue or deliberation, monitored, no doubt, by ranks of professional racism scholars and multiculturalists to ensure no judgment about cultural identity slips into racial vilification.

One grows weary following this kind of meandering. The book begins to have the feel of a conversation you might hear around a dinner table in Sydney's Inner West. One contribution provokes another, an anecdote or two are recounted, and then it is as if the first speaker regains the group's attention but is slightly distracted by the host having produced another bottle of Penfolds Bin 407.

David Goodhart offers a more incisive analysis of the development of multiculturalism in his

study of post-war British immigration, *The British Dream*. Goodhart, the founding editor of *Prospect* magazine, weighs the meaning of national identity and examines the ways in which growth in cultural and ethnic diversity has strained it. He challenges a number of the prevailing views about the effect of immigration on British society and mounts some discomfiting arguments. First, immigration did not feature significantly in the life of Britain until the post-war years. More people now arrive in Britain in a single year than they did in the entire period from 1066 to 1950. Second, the social and economic benefits of this immigration are more mixed than politicians care to admit. Third, the extent of the demographic transformation of Britain brought about by high levels of immigration, particularly after 1997 under Tony Blair, has been enormous.

Multiculturalism has also evolved in the period from the 1950s and 1960s from a more liberal, integrationist form promoting equal rights and the eradication of racial discrimination to a harder, more separatist form that privileges minority identities over common citizenship and casts doubt on the legitimacy of the notion of a core national culture. Separatist multiculturalism emerged in the early 1980s and was fuelled by the Salman Rushdie affair at the end of that decade. Goodhart maintains that as this harder form of multiculturalism has taken hold, so minority leaders have increasingly demanded a separate slice of power and resources rather than the means to create a common life. The danger of allowing separatist forms of multiculturalism to flourish is that it fosters what Goodhart calls 'reverse discrimination' whereby 'the minority wants the majority society to shift its norms, values and laws to better suit the minority' (p. 196). 'In its extreme form separatist multiculturalism even ... turned a blind eye to practices that were the opposite of the liberalism that inspired it: forced marriage, female genital mutilation, the hounding of gays' (p. 197). Goodhart thinks 'common sense would surely suggest that minority autonomy and feelings of national solidarity pull in different directions.' (p. 206). He searches hard for evidence that indicates otherwise, but he does not find any.

Advocates of hard multiculturalism, such as Soutphommasane, however, maintain that strong multicultural identities are perfectly compatible with strong national identity. For Soutphommasane, multiculturalism is about allowing those distinct groups to determine their own ways of belonging to a national community, even to the extent of admitting sources other than English-speaking democratic authority to any conversation about the principles of Australian parliamentary democracy. 'For example,' he explains, 'Italian immigrants should be able to appeal to Italian democratic norms as citizens in Australia—and we should be willing to adopt Italian democratic wisdom' (p. 109). It is a comical suggestion but Soutphommasane makes it in earnest.

Separatist multiculturalists such as Soutphommasane are slow to admit the tangled complexity they face in calling for funding from the public purse to dethrone the dominant political and social culture while promoting notions of national allegiance and democratic national citizenship. Multiculturalism must really be about the weight it is deemed proper to afford cultures other than the prevailing Australian one. Once the rule of law determines the extent of permissible behaviours, the state should get out of the business of supporting or maintaining immigrant ethnic cultures.

Reviewed by Peter Kurti

Balance: The Economics of Great Powers from Ancient Rome to Modern America
By Glenn Hubbard and Tim Kane
New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013
US$28, 351 pages
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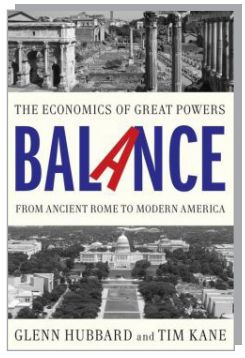
ISBN 9781476700274 (ebook)



Two great shibboleths have long been imported from history into popular works. They relate to the Fall of the Roman Empire and the Industrial Revolution. Nowadays