

opinion

# Patriotism can still be a force for good

Paul Abela

Contributed to The Globe and Mail

*Paul Abela is a philosopher and associate professor at Acadia University.*



Is patriotism dead?

In 2022, this may seem an odd question. Isn't patriotism running riot over the globe as the inherited international order falters? Cosmopolitanism is out, love of country in.

Closer to home, on July 1, our own thoughts of "true patriot love" aren't far off. Flags, family picnics and, for those sufficiently brave, perhaps even some singing of the national anthem.

As someone with roots in the Jurassic period, one of my earliest memories is of Expo 67 and listening to Bobby Gimby's "[Caa-naa-daa](#)" on a 7-inch single. Patriotism seemed simple.

That was then.

Today, in spite of appearances, I think patriotism is an endangered political animal. Here's why.

The political left has, correctly, drawn attention to histories of oppression and marginalization that cannot be separated, for example, from the Canadian identity. Long struggles against the subjugation of women, racist "none-is-too-many" immigration policies, the shameful treatment of Indigenous peoples, the criminalization of homosexuality – all of these concerns serve as a

brief reminder that the “We” in “We stand on guard” camouflages a discomfoting historical picture.

Perhaps even more fundamental, the left has little sympathy for the very idea of a single universal identity. Identities, we are told, are multifarious. We slip into them and out of them; ideally by choice, often by the dictates of others. There is no “We” worthy of the pronoun.

Lastly, patriotism is associated with militarism. While there is no shortage of support for our veterans on Remembrance Day, embracing patriotism is seen by some on the left as stoking the war machine.

The death of patriotism on the left has gifted the concept to the right. Political actors in a host of right-wing governments, from Hungary to Russia, from Brazil to India, have attempted to cast progressives as unpatriotic, “woke,” cosmopolitan elites who have little respect for cultural tradition, religion or the responsibilities of citizenship. Former U.S. president Donald Trump’s likely 2024 re-election campaign is already mobilizing this political strategy.

If one accepts the logic of the political right’s framing, and the left’s antagonism, a progressive patriotism looks like a non-starter.

However, what the political right is selling is not patriotism but nationalism.

Figures such as Mr. Trump, India’s Narendra Modi and Russia’s Vladimir Putin share the claim for the superiority of their national traditions and projects. With Mr. Trump, for example, we have a version of American exceptionalism that feels itself entitled to describe immigrants on its southern border as drug dealers and rapists. For Mr. Modi, India is a solely Hindu state. His government is increasingly demanding that this “fact” be reflected at all levels of civil society. For Mr. Putin, well, ask the Ukrainians what Russian patriotism looks, and feels, like. Nationalists see themselves as uber patriots. They are not. Just as courage exists as a mean – between cowardice and foolhardiness – so too with patriotism, between internationalism and nationalism. Eleven on the amp is noise, not music.

What the progressive patriot lays claim to, that the nationalist cannot, is the abiding thought that what we celebrate on July 1 is something other than a claim to cultural superiority. If we stick our chests out a little, it’s a recognition that our form of democracy – the liberal democratic state – reflects a politics that is democratically responsive and forward looking.

After all, we’ve managed in this country to have the English and French share the matrimonial bed and, more recently, we have begun a path toward truth and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

Our head of state is distinct from the government of the day. The neutrality of the state sustains a “we” that transcends political antagonism. As Canadians, we can shake hands at the end of the game and take our skates off.

Our liberal democracy has demonstrated the political and legal power to craft evolving forms of cultural advancement. Nothing is locked in. The future never obsolete.

Progressive patriotism celebrates this dynamism. Nationalism fears it.

In addition, unlike right-wing nationalism, love of country provides a bridge to positive international relations. Patriotism and cosmopolitanism need not be in conflict. Attention to forms of community life within a country that have proven effective can provide models, where acceptable, for others to emulate.

Those on the internationalist left who view patriotism as damagingly parochial are also mistaken. In the absence of rippling out from the national to the international level, we are burdened with the impossible task of constructing global forms of human flourishing that have no natural vitality: a concocted world culture having all the linguistic charm, and moving force, of Esperanto.

So is patriotism really dead? Hopefully not, as we need it more than ever.