

Nationalism takes hold in Australia and elsewhere amid COVID-19

By Binoy Kampmark

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Cartoon by Mark David/@mdavidcartoons.

The coronavirus has intensified the patriotism and inwardness of countries all over the world, writes [Dr Binoy Kampmark](#).

ONE DOES NOT wage "wars" on viruses or infections. The impression given in the use of that [unfortunate term](#) is that of fighting an opponent, dressed in military uniform and ready to attack your positions, guns blazing. Something like the coronavirus simply does not care one way or the other, but that has not stopped humankind, and notably the leaders of humankind, getting onto a sort of [Independence Day](#) bandwagon, sporting banners and shouting slogans.

It certainly has made for some dull speech writing. Rather than seeing this as a broadly human mission, the gibberish of patriotism has made a most unwanted appearance from the podiums and

platforms of thinly populated parliaments. Australian Prime Minister [Scott Morrison](#) has done a good bit of stumbling in this regard, [summoning](#) that already misunderstood confection known as the "Anzac spirit" in battling COVID-19.

And not just that spirit [but also](#) "of our Great Depression generation, of those who built the Snowy. Of those who won the great peace of World War II and defended Australia".

Jobless Australians flooded unemployment offices around the country on Monday as Prime Minister Scott Morrison warned the coronavirus pandemic would cause an economic crisis akin to the Great Depression. <https://t.co/zQSW0MtOpQ>

— The Daily Dispatch (@Dispatch_DD)
[March 25, 2020](#)

Such inanities are remarkable when one considers what the Prime Minister wants Australians to do. Is it going to work on critical infrastructure for the country? Not quite. Is it actually donning khaki and heading into battle? Certainly not. Instead, he has been asking people to mostly "self-isolate". People had to "keep a healthy distance" between each other. Hand washing should be frequent. The point here is that Australians are being asked to be patriotic by becoming sanitary lounge lizards and bingers of online activity. Some battle.

Patriotic stirrings against the virus are also to be found in other countries, particularly in the economic context. France's Finance Minister [Bruno Le Maire](#) has urged suppliers and consumers to spend with enthusiasm, but on all products French.

On France Info radio, [he issued his encouragement](#):

"I call on major distributors to make a new effort: Stock up on French products."

Agriculture Minister [Didier Guillaume](#) has done much the same thing, encouraging "buy French" acts in [an interview](#) with BFM TV.

Falling into line with the call, French supermarket chain Carrefour insisted [in a statement](#) that it would put a halt to selling fruit and vegetables of foreign origin where French options were available. The chain would be very shortly shifting *'to 100 per cent French products such as strawberries and asparagus'*.

The year of the virus has many lessons for our politics. One of them is the need for more internationalism & a more global outlook, not less.
<https://t.co/37yWmhUGTL>

— alexmassie (@alexmassie)
[March 31, 2020](#)

What the French do, the Italians can do as well. "[Buy Italian](#)" has become the commercial cry for Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, [Luigi Di Maio](#). "*The first economic measure that all Italians can get involved in at this moment is to buy Italian ... and help our businesses.*" He did, however, issue a qualifier: the call

was only directed at those who could afford it.

The message thrilled right-wing and reactionary figures of the "Italian political-scape". The leader of Fratelli d'Italia, [Giorgia Meloni](#), having expressed her ire at China for having brought the virus to Italian shores, [has done much chest-thumping](#). Now was a time to ignore foreign products and go for "Made in Italy" items. Italians should think of their "*values*", focus on unity, and seek solidarity with good old fashioned "Italian courage".

Those less giddy about the patriotic rush have warned that such acts of nationalist buying go against the pan-European project. Belgian Finance Minister [Alexander De Croo](#), [in an interview with Politico](#), advised caution.

He said:

"We have to be careful about a scenario where some countries will conduct a nationalist economic policy."

These were hardly times "*for aggressive economic nationalism*", the sort that would "*undermine the single market*".

Support Italy, buy Italian.
<https://t.co/gZgdQrBR2C>

— JEtherington
(@Fashjacq) [March 24, 2020](#)

President of the European Commission, [Ursula von der](#)

[Leyen](#), has been more than a touch unimpressed by urgings towards patriotic purchasing. *“A successful European response [to COVID-19] can only be coordinated if our Internal Market and our borders work the way they should,”* she stated in a [March 26 address](#) to the European Parliament plenary session.

She reminded Europe that:

“A crisis without borders cannot be solved by putting barriers between us.”

She took issue with the “only for me” reaction from certain European states. *“And when Europe really needed to prove that this is not only a ‘fair weather union’, too many initially refused to share their umbrella.”*

It was [Samuel Johnson](#) who observed that patriotism, at least of the self-serving sort, tended to be the last refuge of the scoundrel. But it is also the first refuge of the self-interested.

Across Europe, nationalist

characters are in full voice insisting that the virus be dealt with using nationalist solutions. American President [Donald Trump](#) is doing his bit towards that end in the United States.

In Australia, a fiction known as the “Anzac character” has been co-opted by the Morrison Government and other Australian ministers. You would think a language of nationalism and civic duty when it comes to battling pandemics seems, not only odd, but misplaced. The one thing that could not care less, seeing humans not in terms of patriotic heartbeats but cellular matter to invade, is COVID-19 itself.

"The first [#staff](#) to suffer, as they tend to be in these situations, are the [#sessionals](#) who toil to keep the [#teaching](#) system afloat. ["#Australian](#)

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concerns
<https://t.co/Q7kldSkQ3D>
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— Binoy
Kampmark (
[@bkampmark](#)) [March 16,](#)
[2020](#)

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[March 30,](#)
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