

THE RELUCTANT PATRIOT

WHEN THE BOGANS STOP CARING

Dr Dennis Price

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The Illusion of Patriotism

Introduction

In Australia the debate about Australia Day being a day of celebration (patriots and conservatives) or being a day of mourning (Aboriginals and leftists) rages annually, and 2026 was particularly virulent. The consistent theme was stark and striking:

Half the country admonished and diminished the other half -the so-called RWNJs or 'right wing nut jobs' for displaying the Aussie flag – or any similar. 'It's so bogan' – the war cry of the cultural elites and activists. ('Bogan' being the Australian slang term for hillbilly.)

And I wondered: what is a country without patriots? Because I know from personal experience that those mocking the 'patriots' weren't the ones who were going to take up arms. I suspect they can't even imagine a scenario where the whole world doesn't love them anymore.

It reminded me of the great monologue by Colonel Nathan Jessop (Jack Nicolson) in *A Few Good Men*:

"I have a greater responsibility than you can possibly fathom. You weep for Santiago, and you curse the Marines. You have that luxury. You have the luxury of not knowing what I know – that Santiago's death, while tragic, probably saved lives. And my existence, while grotesque and incomprehensible to you, saves lives. You don't want the truth because deep down in places you don't talk about at parties, you want me on that wall. You need me on that wall. We use words like honor, code, loyalty. We use these words as the backbone of a life spent defending something. You use them as a punchline. I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to a man who rises and sleeps under the blanket of the very freedom that I provide, and then questions the manner in which I provide it. I would rather you just said thank you, and went on your way. Otherwise, I suggest you pick up a weapon, and stand a post. Either way, I don't give a damn what you think you are entitled to."

I don't know if it is just me – but I don't think I want to share a bunker with latte-sipping soy-boys when the proverbial hits the fan.

Give me a bogan any day of the week.

My Journey from Conscript to Critic

My personal experience irrevocably shaped my understanding of patriotism. In the 1980s, I was a young white South African conscripted into the South African Defence Force (SADF) during the height of the Border War. We were told we were the frontline defenders of our cherished way of life, standing firm against the tide of "terrorists"—a label assigned to the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies. For two years, plus another two years of

annual ‘call ups’, I served in the Army. I was fortunate enough that my rank (lieutenant) and postings spared me from even firing live ammunition at live people, so I carry no personal scars. But I was in it, and I observed it closely. I lived it.

By the 1990s, the world I had been conscripted to protect had inverted itself. The ANC, once our sworn enemy, transitioned to power in 1994, with Nelson Mandela at its helm. Apartheid was dismantled, and with it, the system of conscription that had sent me to war ended in 1993 [1]. The cause for which I and thousands of other young men had sacrificed our youth, our innocence, and in some cases, lives, had been rendered obsolete overnight. This abrupt reversal left me with a profound and unsettling question: who truly benefited from these sacrifices?

I am not a pacifist. I recognise the fundamental need for a nation to defend itself. However, the patriotic sacrifices demanded of citizens, particularly the working class, disproportionately burden them for abstract gains that enrich the elites. It is an argument that patriotism, in its modern form, has been twisted into a mechanism of control.

The time for a conversation about patriotism is now, before the next crisis, before the next war, before the next generation is asked to make the ultimate sacrifice for a cause they may not truly understand.

1: The Problem – Patriotism as Exploitation

Patriotism, in its purest form, is a noble and necessary sentiment. It is the love for one’s country, the willingness to defend one’s community, the bond that unites a people. But what happens when that sentiment is co-opted, when the language of national duty is used to mask the pursuit of private interests? This chapter defines the core problem that this book seeks to address: the exploitation of patriotism for the benefit of the elite.

The sacrifices demanded in the name of patriotism are immediate and concrete for the working class. They are the lives lost, the bodies broken, the minds scarred by the trauma of war. The benefits, on the other hand, are often abstract and long-term, accruing to the ruling class in the form of expanded markets, secured resources, and enhanced geopolitical power. My service in the South African Border War is a case in point. While we were fighting in the bush, the mining interests that propped up the apartheid regime were secured, and the elite continued to prosper.

The colour of their skins changed, but the exploitation remained.

This is an empty sacrifice- made for a cause that is ultimately rendered meaningless for the masses, while proving profitable for the powerful. The impermanence of allegiances, the way today’s enemy can become tomorrow’s ally, exposes the cynical manipulation at the heart of exploitative patriotism. When the ANC, our once-reviled enemy, became the ruling party of South Africa, the futility of our war was laid bare, and the sense of betrayal was profound [2].

The Chain of Protection: Family, Community, Country

The appeal of patriotism is rooted in a simple and powerful logic: to protect our families, we must protect our communities, and to protect our communities, we must protect our country. This “chain of protection” is a powerful motivator, and it is this very logic that is exploited by the powerful. The chain breaks when the definition of “country” is narrowed to serve the interests of the elite. In apartheid South Africa, the “way of life” we were ostensibly protecting was not a universal one, but the privileged existence of the white minority. The protection of the country became synonymous with the protection of racial privilege, and this frame was the cause of its universal vilification and ultimate failure.

I later had to learn that my war was an unjust war.

The Impermanence of Allegiances

This raises the question if there are actually any just wars in a globalised world? The history of international relations is a history of shifting alliances. The enemy of today can be the ally of tomorrow, and vice versa. This constant flux exposes the manipulability of patriotism. The unbanning of the ANC in 1990 and the democratic elections of 1994 were a seismic shift in the South African political landscape. The narrative that had sustained the apartheid regime, the narrative of a nation under siege by communist terrorists, was dismantled overnight. For those of us who had fought in the Border War, this was a moment of profound cognitive dissonance. The cause for which we had been willing to die had been exposed as a political construct, a temporary and self-serving narrative.

2: Historical Context – Shifting Alliances Over Centuries

To understand the transient nature of patriotism, we must look to history. For two millennia, the map of the world has been in a constant state of flux, with empires rising and falling, borders shifting, and alliances forming and dissolving. This chapter will provide a brief overview of this history, demonstrating that the enmities and friendships that define our world are not eternal, but are instead the product of shifting power dynamics, economic interests, and ideological currents.

From the regional conflicts of the ancient world to the globalised rivalries of the modern era, history is replete with examples of enemies becoming allies and allies becoming enemies.

The United States and Japan, once locked in a brutal war, are now close allies. The nations of Europe, which for centuries were engaged in a seemingly endless cycle of conflict, are now united in the European Union. These transformations, while often celebrated as triumphs of diplomacy and reconciliation, also serve as a stark reminder of the impermanence of the causes for which countless lives have been sacrificed.

Ancient to Medieval Periods: The Roots of Regional Conflict

In the ancient and medieval periods, conflicts were largely regional in nature. The empires of China and Vietnam were engaged in a long and bloody struggle for dominance, while the feudal kingdoms of Europe were locked in a constant state of war. These conflicts, while smaller in scale than the global wars of the 20th century, were no less brutal, and they were fought by armies filled with peasants and commoners who had little stake in the outcome.

The Colonial and Modern Eras: The Globalisation of Exploitation

The age of exploration and colonialism ushered in a new era of global conflict. The European powers, in their quest for resources and markets, carved up the world, creating new enmities and exacerbating old ones. The Opium Wars between Britain and China, the colonial wars in Africa and Asia, and the two World Wars of the 20th century were all fought on a global scale, and they were all fought by working-class soldiers who died for the cause of empire.

Post-Cold War Shifts: From Foes to Partners

The end of the Cold War brought about another dramatic realignment of global alliances. The United States and Vietnam, once bitter enemies, are now trade partners. The nations of Eastern Europe, once under the thumb of the Soviet Union, are now members of NATO. These shifts, while welcome, also highlight the cynical pragmatism of the powerful.

The elites who once sent their citizens to die in the name of fighting communism are now happy to do business with communist regimes, as long as it is profitable.

The US-Vietnam War: From Enemies to Allies

The Vietnam War is another classic example of exploitative patriotism. The draft system in the United States was heavily biased towards the working class, with college deferments and other loopholes allowing the sons of the elite to avoid service. Over 58,000 American soldiers, the vast majority of them from working-class backgrounds, died in a war that was ultimately lost. And yet, today, the United States and Vietnam are strategic partners, united in their opposition to China's growing influence in the region. The sacrifices of those 58,000 soldiers have been rendered meaningless by the shifting tides of geopolitics.

The South African Border War: My Personal Battlefield

My own experience as a conscript in the South African Defence Force is a powerful example of exploitative patriotism. In the 1980s, the apartheid regime was facing increasing internal and external pressure. The End Conscription Campaign (ECC), a multiracial organisation that challenged the legitimacy of the apartheid military, was gaining momentum [3]. In response, the regime doubled down on its militaristic rhetoric, casting the conflict in Angola and Namibia as a holy war against communism. Young white men like myself were conscripted into the army and sent to the border to fight and die for a cause that was, in reality, about preserving the economic and political power of the white elite [4].

Australian National Service: Bogans on the Frontline

Australia's own history of national service during the Vietnam War provides another example of the class-based nature of patriotic sacrifice. The "birthday ballot" system, while ostensibly random, was in practice biased against the working class. Exemptions for university students and other privileged groups meant that it was the "bogans" and the boys from the bush who were disproportionately sent to fight and die in the jungles of Vietnam.

3: Philosophical Arguments – Defending and Critiquing Patriotism

Arguments in Favour of Patriotism: Virtue and the Collective Good

Philosophers from Plato to the present day have argued that patriotism is a virtue, a necessary component of a just and stable society. The social contract theorists, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, argued that patriotism is the glue that holds society together, the sentiment that motivates citizens to obey the law and to defend the state.

Thomas Hobbes, writing in the 17th century during the English Civil War, argued that without a sovereign state to maintain order, life would be "nasty, brutish, and short." In his view, patriotism is not about blind loyalty to an abstract nation, but rather a pragmatic mutual agreement to submit to a central authority for the sake of collective security. The state, or "Leviathan" as Hobbes called it, is the mechanism by which we protect ourselves from the chaos of the state of nature. Patriotism, in this framework, is the sentiment that binds us to this protective mechanism, ensuring that we fulfil our obligations to the collective and that the collective fulfils its obligations to us.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau expanded on this idea, arguing that patriotism cultivates civic virtue. For Rousseau, patriotism is not merely a practical sentiment, but a moral one. It is through our love for our country that we learn to transcend our narrow self-interest and embrace the common good. Patriotism, in this view, makes us better people by tying our personal good to the collective good.

Communitarian thinkers, such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel, have taken a different approach, arguing that patriotism is an essential part of our identity and a source of meaning and belonging in an increasingly fragmented world. MacIntyre argues that virtues like courage and loyalty are not abstract principles, but are embedded in the practices and traditions of particular communities. Patriotism, in this view, is not a universal sentiment, but one that is rooted in the specific history and culture of a particular nation. It is through our participation in these traditions that we develop the virtues necessary for human flourishing.

Michael Sandel, a contemporary communitarian philosopher, argues that patriotism is rooted in what he calls "constitutive attachments." Our sense of self is shaped by our national narratives, our culture, and our history. We are not atomistic individuals who choose our attachments, but rather beings who are constituted by our attachments. Patriotism, in this

view, is not a choice, but a fundamental part of who we are. It is the sentiment that binds us to the communities that have shaped us and given our lives meaning.

John Stuart Mill, the utilitarian philosopher, argued that patriotism is good if it maximises overall happiness and promotes human flourishing. Mill emphasised the importance of "higher pleasures," such as liberty, knowledge, and moral development. Patriotism, in his view, is justified if it protects these higher pleasures and the conditions necessary for human flourishing. Mill recognised that patriotism can be a stepping stone to a more universal concern for humanity, as the local attachments that patriotism cultivates can teach us empathy and compassion that can be extended to all people.

Critiques of Patriotism: Impermanence and Manipulation

Other philosophers have been more critical of patriotism, arguing that it is a dangerous and irrational sentiment that can lead to war, xenophobia, and oppression. The existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, for example, saw patriotism as a form of "bad faith," a way of avoiding the difficult questions of individual responsibility and moral choice. In Camus's view, patriotism is a way of escaping the absurdity of human existence by surrendering our individual agency to the collective. It is a form of self-deception that allows us to avoid confronting the fundamental meaninglessness of existence.

However, Camus also recognised that in the face of this absurdity, we have the power to create meaning through our actions. In this sense, patriotic sacrifice can be seen as a form of rebellion against the absurdity of existence. By sacrificing ourselves for a cause greater than ourselves, we assert our agency and create meaning in a meaningless world. Yet, this meaning is only authentic if it is freely chosen and if it is rooted in a commitment to human dignity and justice.

The Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci argued that patriotism is a tool of "hegemony," a way for the ruling class to maintain its power by creating a false sense of national unity. In Gramsci's view, the ruling class uses patriotism to obscure the reality of class conflict and to convince the working class that their interests are aligned with those of the elite. Patriotism, in this framework, is an ideological construct that serves the interests of the powerful by making the working class complicit in their own exploitation.

Hannah Arendt, the political theorist, warned that patriotism can easily devolve into nationalism, a dangerous ideology that blinds people to moral realities and can lead to totalitarianism. Arendt distinguished between patriotism, which she saw as a love for one's country and its institutions, and nationalism, which she saw as an irrational and dangerous exaltation of the nation above all other considerations. In her view, nationalism is a perversion of patriotism that can lead to the most horrific atrocities.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, had a more ambiguous view of patriotism. On the one hand, he saw patriotism as a form of "herd mentality," a way in which the weak use collective sentiment to constrain the strong. On the other hand, he recognised that patriotism, understood as a commitment to the creation of a strong and vital culture, could be a force for human excellence. Nietzsche's critique of patriotism is not that it is inherently wrong, but that it is often used in a way that stifles human creativity and excellence.

Balancing Defence Needs with the Dangers of Exploitation

My own position is that patriotism can be a force for good, but only if it is tempered by a critical and questioning spirit. We must be willing to defend our communities, but we must also be vigilant against the dangers of manipulation and exploitation. We must demand that our leaders be transparent about the reasons for war, and we must hold them accountable for the consequences of their decisions. And we must never forget that the ultimate justification for any war is the protection of human life and dignity, not the pursuit of abstract geopolitical interests.

The philosophical arguments for patriotism are compelling. The social contract theorists remind us that without a state to protect us, we are vulnerable to chaos and violence. The communitarians remind us that we are not isolated individuals, but members of communities that give our lives meaning and shape our identities. And the utilitarians remind us that patriotism can be a force for human flourishing if it is directed towards the right ends.

But the critiques of patriotism are equally compelling. Gramsci's analysis of hegemony reminds us that patriotism can be (and has been) used as a tool of oppression by the ruling class. Arendt's warning about nationalism reminds us that patriotism can easily devolve into a dangerous and irrational ideology. And Camus's existentialism reminds us that patriotism can be a way of avoiding the difficult questions of individual responsibility and moral choice.

The challenge, then, is to find a way to preserve the genuine benefits of patriotism—the sense of community, the commitment to collective defence, the cultivation of civic virtue—while guarding against its dangers. This requires a critical and questioning spirit, a willingness to examine the claims made in the name of patriotism, and a commitment to ensuring that patriotic sacrifices are made for just causes and that the burden of those sacrifices is shared equitably across all members of society.

I do not know the answer, beyond that it is time for some dialogue to happen. But for this to be meaningful, there has to be recognition and mutual respect between all the parties.

In 2026, in Australia, and as best I can tell, also in America, the derision is a one way street from left to right.

4: Who Bears the Burden?

The burden of patriotic sacrifice is not shared equally. From the historical data on conscription to the modern-day statistics on voluntary enlistment, the evidence is clear: it is the working class, the poor, and the marginalised who are disproportionately sent to fight and die in our wars.

Recruitment and Exemptions: A System Rigged in Favour of the Elite

Throughout history, the systems of military recruitment have been rigged in favour of the elite. In the age of conscription, the wealthy and the well-connected were often able to secure exemptions or deferments, while the poor and the working class were forced to serve. In Australia during the Vietnam War era, the birthday ballot system was ostensibly designed to be fair and random. However, exemptions were available for those in certain occupations, such as theological students and ministers, and for those who could prove conscientious objection to all forms of war. These exemptions were far more accessible to the educated and the well-connected than to working-class men.

In the United States during the Vietnam War, the class bias was even more explicit. College deferments allowed upper and middle-class students to avoid service, while working-class men, often without access to higher education, filled the ranks. The result was that over 58,000 American soldiers, the vast majority of them from working-class backgrounds, died in a war that was ultimately lost.

Even in the age of the all-volunteer military, the class bias persists. The Australian Defence Force recruits primarily from 17 to 24-year-olds, with recruitment campaigns that emphasise skills, adventure, and camaraderie. The military offers stable employment, training, and income that is often higher than entry-level civilian jobs available to those without tertiary education. For young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, military service can seem like a pathway to stability and social mobility.

The Officer-Enlisted Divide: A Class System in Uniform

The class disparities in the military are not limited to recruitment. They are also reflected in the officer-enlisted divide, which is a class system in uniform. The officer corps of most militaries is still dominated by the upper and middle classes, while the enlisted ranks are filled with men and women from working-class backgrounds. This divide has profound consequences for the lives and careers of those who serve.

In the United Kingdom, a significant percentage of officers come from private schools, compared to only 7% of the general population. There are significant cultural barriers that prevent working-class entrants from advancing to officer rank. The ADF similarly requires officers to have university degrees, which favours those with access to higher education. Working-class recruits enter as privates and face slower advancement, with fewer opportunities to transition to officer roles.

This officer-enlisted divide is not merely a matter of rank and pay. It is also a matter of power and decision-making. Officers make the strategic decisions that determine whether soldiers live or die. They plan the operations, set the tactics, and decide how to allocate resources. Enlisted soldiers, by contrast, are expected to follow orders without question. This means that the class divide in the military translates directly into a divide in power and responsibility. The working-class soldiers bear the risk, while the middle and upper-class officers make the decisions.

Furthermore, the economic benefits of military service are not equally distributed. Officers receive higher pay, better housing, and more opportunities for advancement. Enlisted soldiers, by contrast, often struggle financially, particularly if they have families to support. When soldiers are injured or killed, the compensation they receive is often inadequate, and the support services available to them and their families are frequently insufficient. The burden of sacrifice, then, is not only borne disproportionately by the working class, but the benefits of service are also distributed unequally.

Why the Class Disparities Exist: Systemic and Cultural Roots

The class disparities in military service are rooted in systemic and structural inequalities. For working-class men, military service often appears to be a viable and even attractive option. It offers escape from dead-end jobs, the opportunity to travel, and the promise of brotherhood and camaraderie. These are genuine benefits, and it is understandable why young men from disadvantaged backgrounds might be drawn to military service.

For the upper and middle classes, by contrast, military service is rarely necessary. They have access to inheritances, family networks, and educational opportunities that provide alternative pathways to success and stability. They can pursue careers in law, finance, medicine, or business without ever having to risk their lives in military service. The choice to serve in the military is, for them, a choice, not a necessity.

This difference in options is not accidental. It is the result of deliberate policy choices that have created a system in which the wealthy can avoid military service while the poor cannot.

Tax policies, education policies, and labour market policies all work together to create a situation in which military service is an attractive option for the working class and an unnecessary option for the elite. The result is a military that is disproportionately composed of working-class men, who bear the burden of national defence while the elite reap the benefits.

Moreover, the cultural narrative around military service reinforces these class disparities. Military recruitment campaigns often appeal to working-class values such as physical strength, courage, and loyalty. They emphasise the opportunity for adventure and the promise of belonging to something greater than oneself. These are powerful appeals, and they resonate particularly with young men from disadvantaged backgrounds who may feel that society has little to offer them. By contrast, the elite are socialised to pursue careers in law, medicine, business, and academia. Military service is seen as beneath them, a career path for those without better options.

5: Modern Debates – Irony and Cognitive Dissonance

The ironies and contradictions of modern patriotism are on full display in the contemporary debates over issues like Australia Day. On the one hand, we have the flag-waving nationalists

who demand unquestioning loyalty to the state. On the other hand, we have the left-leaning activists who burn the flag and denounce the nation as a racist and oppressive entity.

Australia Day 2026 as a Flashpoint

The Australia Day protests of 2026 are a powerful example of this cognitive dissonance. While thousands of people marched in Invasion Day rallies across the country, denouncing the celebration of Australia's colonial past, others gathered to celebrate their national pride [5]. The burning of the Australian flag in Brisbane and the clashes between protesters and police in Melbourne are a stark reminder of the deep divisions in our society [6].

These protests reveal a fundamental contradiction at the heart of modern patriotism. On one side, we have those who see patriotism as unquestioning loyalty to the nation. On the other side, we have those who see patriotism as incompatible with justice and equality. But there is a deeper irony here. Many of those who burn the flag and denounce the nation are the same people who, in the event of a military threat to Australia, would expect the nation to defend them. They would expect the state to mobilise its resources, to send young men and women into harm's way, to make the ultimate sacrifice to protect their freedom and their lives. This is the ultimate cognitive dissonance: to reject patriotism in times of peace, but to demand patriotic sacrifice in times of war.

The Broader Implications for Patriotism

These debates over Australia Day are not just about a date on the calendar. They are about the very meaning of patriotism in a multicultural and globalised world. They raise fundamental questions about our history, our identity, and our future. And they reveal the selective and self-serving nature of modern patriotism.

The Australia Day protests also expose the way in which patriotism is weaponised by the political elite. When the government invokes patriotism to justify military spending, to silence dissent, or to promote nationalist policies, it is using patriotism as a tool of control. When left-wing activists burn the flag, they are rejecting this weaponised patriotism. But in doing so, they are also rejecting the possibility of a genuine and inclusive patriotism, one that is rooted in a commitment to justice and equality.

The challenge, then, is to reclaim patriotism from both the extremes on either side.

The brutal reality is that when the first shots are fired, you are going to need those patriots willing to *“pick up a weapon, and stand a post.”*

How do we develop a patriotism that is rooted in a commitment to the wellbeing of **all citizens**, not just the elite. And we must ensure that when the call to patriotic sacrifice is made, it is made fairly and equitably, and that the benefits of that sacrifice are shared by all.

6: Towards Solutions – Resetting the System

The Merit of Withdrawal and Unionisation

One of the most powerful tools that citizens have to resist the exploitation of patriotism is the power of collective action. The End Conscription Campaign in South Africa is a powerful example of how organised resistance can challenge the legitimacy of an unjust war. The ECC, which operated from 1983 to 1993, brought together activists from across the political spectrum to challenge the apartheid regime's militarism. They argued that conscription was being used to prop up an unjust system, and they called for an end to mandatory military service. Their campaign was ultimately successful, contributing to the broader movement that led to the end of apartheid and the abolition of conscription in 1993.

I propose that young people today should consider similar forms of unionisation, such as organised refusal to serve, strikes, and advocacy for a more equitable system of national service. This is not a call for pacifism or for the abandonment of national defence. Rather, it is a call for young people to assert their power and to demand that any system of national service be fair and equitable. If the burden of national defence is to be shared, then it must be shared equally. If the elite are unwilling to share that burden, then they have no right to demand it of others.

This form of collective action can take many forms. Young people could organise to demand that military service be made truly universal, with no exemptions for the wealthy or the well-connected. They could demand that the benefits of military service be distributed equitably, with officers and enlisted soldiers receiving comparable pay and benefits. They could demand that pre-war debates be held before any military action is undertaken, ensuring that the decision to go to war is made democratically and transparently.

Practical Reforms for a More Just System

In addition to collective action, there are also a number of practical reforms that could be implemented to create a more just and equitable system of national service. These reforms are not revolutionary, but they are necessary if we are to build a system that is fair and just.

First, we must end class-biased recruitment practices. Military recruitment campaigns should not target disadvantaged communities or exploit economic vulnerability. Instead, recruitment should be based on genuine interest and aptitude, without regard to socioeconomic status. If military service is to be voluntary, then it must be a genuine choice, not a desperate necessity for those without other options.

Second, we must ensure that the benefits of military service are distributed equitably. This means that officers and enlisted soldiers should receive comparable pay and benefits. It means that promotion should be based on merit, not on social class or educational background. It means that veterans should receive adequate support services, including mental health care, job training, and financial assistance. The burden of sacrifice should be matched by genuine support and recognition.

Third, we must establish a system of pre-war debate and deliberation. Before any military action is undertaken, there should be a public debate about the reasons for war, the likely costs, and the potential benefits. This debate should involve not just politicians and military leaders, but also ordinary citizens, academics, and civil society organisations. The decision to go to war should be made democratically and transparently, with full consideration of the human costs.

Fourth, we must hold our leaders accountable for the consequences of their decisions. If a war is fought on the basis of false claims or misleading information, there should be consequences. If military leaders make decisions that result in unnecessary loss of life, they should be held accountable. If the benefits of war accrue primarily to the elite while the costs are borne by the working class, this should be exposed and challenged.

Fifth, we must develop a more inclusive understanding of patriotism. Patriotism should not be equated with military service or with unquestioning loyalty to the state. Rather, patriotism should be understood as a commitment to the wellbeing of all citizens, to justice and equality, and to the continuous improvement of the nation. This means that dissent and criticism are not unpatriotic, but are essential expressions of genuine patriotism.

Sixth, we must address the broader structural inequalities that make military service an attractive option for the working class. We must invest in education, in job training, in social services, and in economic opportunities. We must create a society in which young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have genuine choices, not just the choice between military service and poverty.

These reforms are not easy to implement, and they will face resistance from those who benefit from the current system. But they are necessary if we are to build a more just and equitable society. And they are necessary if we are to reclaim patriotism from those who would use it as a tool of exploitation and control.

It is time for some DEI in the patriotism stakes too.

The conversation needs to happen now, and the laws must be enacted now- in a time of peace – while we can. Failing to do this will result in any future war following the same trajectory as past wars where the bogans die and the elites prosper.

Conclusion: A Call to Reclaim Patriotism

From my own experience as a conscript in the South African Border War to the global examples of exploitative patriotism, I argued that the time for a conversation about patriotism is now. We can no longer afford to be complacent about the way that this powerful sentiment is used and abused by the powerful. We must reclaim patriotism from the cynics and the manipulators, and we must build a more just and equitable system of national service.

This is not a call to abandon our love for our country, but a call to deepen it.

If I had to choose between two unpalatable options, I'd go with the bogans – because they are the ones who are actually willing to fight. And since the disrespect flows from left to right, the initiative must come from the left:

The future of our nation, and the future of our world, depends on the cultural elite to recognise the inherent imbalance and disproportionate, class-based sacrifices built into the system, and to create the platform and the opportunities to dialogue – and ultimately to yield some privilege to create a fair, sustainable form of patriotism.

If the 'workers' don't get a better cut, don't be surprised when they choose to stand by and watch the factory burn to the ground.

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