

Are you with us or against us? Why a modern state can't be a 'team'.

Sean David Burke, August 2014__

Every now and then a populist politician uses the 'team' analogy to muster support for one policy or another. The nation itself is referred to as a 'team'. A quick hunt around online will uncover a 'Team America' a 'Team Britain' and, most recently, a 'Team Australia'.



'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master — that's all.'

Humpty Dumpty is wrong. People use words to communicate meaning. There needs to be a generally accepted meaning for each word for communication to work. If a narrow word, like the word 'team', is used to describe something broad, like a modern nation state, then it will fail to do justice to both the concept and the reality.

Sufficient safeguards

Nation states have laws to protect themselves from excessive action by citizens. These are often referred to as the offences of treason or sedition. They are sufficient. It is not necessary to prepare the ground for a new type of charge, that of '*not being sufficiently on side*' or '*not being a team player*'. Slogans like '*Team Australia*' are the thin edge of a wedge, the sort of wedge that was popular in Europe in the 1930s.

Modern states exist with unique mixes of safeguards for citizens from excesses of power, too. Every one of these safeguards can be undermined over time, if they are allowed to be.

The rule of law

States have constitutions and respect for that central law and the laws built upon it is crucial. They cannot be avoided with an excess of '*team spirit*'. Individuals are not more equal before the law on the basis that they are good '*team players*'.

Separations of powers

States separate different aspects of their being. There are often separations between the legislature, executive and judicial functions. Federal states separate powers between levels of government. There are also functional separations, such as when a minister delegates authority to an 'independent' group. Such separations carry the potential for healthy disagreement.

Review of executive action

Administrative review at each step of governmental action, and freedom of information, underpin the ability of citizens to make judgments about their elected officials and public servants.

Pluralist democracy

In modern states, different political opinions are able to find expression in elections. This is exemplified by the fact that there are always at least a few complete buffoons in every parliament.

Freedom of speech

Often constitutionally enshrined, freedom of expression requires that dissent is not illegal.

A Free Media

The media support and carry many of the freedoms citizens have. When journalists are attacked or imprisoned for their work, the nature of the whole state is called into question

Scientific inquiry

Science needs to be free to investigate and come to conclusions, and dissenting scientific opinion, likewise, has to be allowed.

Free Teachers

Teachers must be free, individually and collegially, to teach. If the state dictates to teachers the content of their lessons, then education is merely the servant of the state.

Globalism, Multiculturalism and Diversity

Modern states have multicultural populations and exist in an increasingly connected world. Respect for difference is crucial to the fair operation of government. It is too easy, with narrowed thinking, to come to the conclusion that membership of a particular ethnic group, skin colour, religion, language gender or sexuality is inconsistent with membership of the *'team'*

Save teams for sport

In a modern state, conflict, competition, election, difference, disagreement, contest and resolution are essential parts of the way we choose to live together. They are good things. It is not possible to reduce the complexity of a modern state to the idea that everyone needs to be on the same *'team'*. Simplistic ideas like this are appealing because they speak to people in a way which is entertaining and emotionally satisfying. The trouble is that any narrow term invariably has the effect of narrowing debate. It is a way of pretending that the complexity isn't there. This can have consequences for policy in many areas.

Politicians are elected representatives. They have a duty to use language in a responsible way. Whenever they use terms that do not properly describe the things they refer to, they do a disservice and citizens have a duty to correct them.

No modern state is a team, no matter how appealing that might sound.

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Humpty Dumpty: Thanks to Lewis Carroll

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