

Ending the big 'ism

By Tom Nairn,

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"All men at God's round table sit, And all men must be fed; But this loaf in my hand, This loaf is my son's bread. The pine-tree is a king, He lifts high his steeple; But greater is the wheat — The wheat is a people."

Mary Gilmore (1865-1962), "Nationality", in Les Murray, ed., *Hell and After: Four early English-language poets of Australia* (2005 [1])

Globalism is in trouble these days. Even the Economist has found itself driven to pedal harder in order to restore the faith (see its issue of 5-11 November 2005: "Tired of Globalisation...but in need of much more of it"). The time of easy prophecies is past. Though mostly written at earlier stages, John Ralston Saul's book *The Collapse of Globalism and the Rebirth of Nationalism* [2] (2005) remains a good guide to the process as a whole. It is well and lightly written, often humorous, and properly scathing about both the zealots and their politician-donkeys.

But some critical caution is also called for. Saul is writing about globalism (or "globalisation" in the now standard journalistic sense) and not about what might better be described as "globality" — that is, those ways in which, since the 1980s, the globe has become more united, acquired common features and recognised important elements of common destiny and interest. The latter are indeed largely irreversible, and the author doesn't claim otherwise. What he does assert, rightly, is that such truths bear little relationship to the political and ideological follies still being committed in their name — like the massed choirs of Rupert Murdoch, and the war dances of John Howard, George W Bush and Tony Blair.

An analogy can be made here with the earlier story of "internationalism". Suffixes like "-ism" aren't accidents. They appeared in the 19th century for good reason, and are to be found still sprouting in the 21st: information technology may have changed the semiotic soil a bit, but not yet all that much. They stand for modern myths: the grander, more colourful belief-structures made necessary by general literacy and the compulsion of all state forms to maintain a minimum of non-coercive unity in the societies they govern. Modern -isms and -ologies signal not simply an idea-system, but its importance — its nature as a cause, a banner in history's wind. As Karen Armstrong writes in her *A Short History of Myth* [3] (2005), "myth is not a story told for its own sake. It shows us how we should behave".

In 1864 the (London) *Daily Telegraph* commented sniffily that "Of course a French race-course is not like an English one. Internationality is not yet so perfect" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, volume 7). But by the 1880s the -ism had taken over. The *Pall Mall Gazette* recorded how in 1886 a trade-union conference had "considerably advanced the interests of internationalism", and by 1895 the *Thinker* saw "Internationalism as the only virtue that comports with peace". By the latter date, of course, Marxist socialists had also raised the banner of a supposedly transnational proletariat's devotion to revolutionary utopia. In contrast with "nationalism" (a

product of the 1870s) the international "-ism" had come to stand for peace and all that was irreproachable: the spirit at large, as it were, untarnished by the parochial and the exclusive.

Faith-building

Saul sees its global successor as originating in the 1970s. At that time "the general atmosphere was one of discomfort and fear of disorder among the Western elites". After the Cuban missile crisis, the cold war still persisted, only partially relieved by the half-measures of *détente* and east-west trade. Fear of disorder was if anything greater to the east: dissent and envy proliferated in the Soviet satellites, while the weird tumult of Mao's "cultural revolution" overtook China.

The uncertainty was answered in two ways. First, "management" assumed a new stature as the supposed remedy — a new discipline distinct from old-style state control and bureaucracy, with its own rules and norms, teachable in university departments or special colleges. A few years later, the simultaneous information revolution would produce the key instrument of such education, a Siren of the new age: Microsoft's "PowerPoint" display. Via hypnotic bullet-points, box-chains, command-arrows and deadening repetitions, post-1960s Argonauts were quickly impaled on hidden reefs. Lucky escape from the dragon of communism had exposed them to further deadly perils. Initially a business tool, the style soon caught on more widely. Capitalism did more than encroach on the former arena of public debate: it began to take it over.

However, more was needed for such a sea-change. Challenging liberalism and socialism was one thing, but the aim was final defeat, replacement. Hence the second new instrument: a faith compatible with management — secular, naturally, yet with the unreasoning force of common sense and popular commitment. This is where "globalism" came in, "stage right" as the author describes:

"Taking a slash-and-burn approach, Globalism promised that that a broader, unstoppable force of initially market energy and then human energy would be released...It was all about releasing forces. Societies everywhere would have to follow, unleashing this energy in every domain..."

"Deregulation" followed, a simple implementation of the creed, to which there was soon "no alternative". PowerPoint was winning. One consequence was what Saul describes amusingly in his chapter "The Gathering Force"— the triumph of masochism among western and Free World nation-state élites. They had learnt measured compliance during the cold war's boot-camp; Globalism now turned genuflection into prostration. Ruling orders formerly driven by nationalism found no alternative to effusive conversion: "relaxed and comfortable" (in Judith Brett's [4] words) as choir-boys and -girls of the new dispensation.

Because globalisation was a universal, freestanding force bestowing property upon all, it worked best through "the manager as castrato". Eunuch leaderships were appropriate under the Sultanate of Capital, following baptism at the Free Trade font and resolute oaths never to favour "their own" in the old sense (or at least, not too brazenly).

Once upon a time, crazed socialists had declared national fates redundant before the onward march of a Proletarian *Internationale*; now, fire-breathing marketeers showed the insignificance of nations beneath the wheels of transnational enterprise. National pride lay in inventing ever-smarter modes of submissiveness, via PP-equipped think-tanks.

This evangelical form of managerial capital was hugely successful. Even while creating self-colonising political élites in the west, it sapped the will of state-socialist leaderships in the east, long before the 1989 breakthrough. Indeed the Leninist bureaucracies found conversion all too

easy: the road from Stalinist or Castroite harangue to market-force sycophancy proved short, though hardly sweet. And notoriously, converts make the most passionate missionaries. They would never have knuckled under to America openly; but now, via fervent embrace of projector and new religion, they could gain face by submission rather than losing it. Saul's interpretation of that switch is the nerve of his book — and indeed, I would argue, of a more general Canadian angle on the globalising world. Free-tradery and technological determinism together became a technique for downgrading (or even eliminating) *politics*.

Globalist politics

When Saul was in Australia in 2005 promoting this book, he argued in one interview that mounting resistance to globalisation is shown above all by a return to politics. He had already outlined [5] the thesis in a previous Australian visit, in 1999.

Between the 1970s and the 2003 Iraqi war, the number of formally democratic states at the United Nations increased, mainly because of post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav developments. But simultaneously democracy was reined in and qualified by the new global faith. Nations were winning freedom just in time to perceive it no longer mattered. "Independence" had become simply the right to choose one's own dependence, putting economics first and (therefore) following World Bank and G8 strictures as obediently as possible. In the dominant industrial economies, disenchantment with politics successfully prevailed — tending in some cases even to hostility, as anti-political individualism or "family-first" rebirth.

In the United Kingdom, for example, the "non-voting party" that won the elections of both 2001 and 2005 was clearly founded not only on resentment of New Labour, but also a feeling that the system had nothing other or better to offer. In Australia, not long after the author's visit, Mark Latham's Diaries [6] came out, urging all young people to avoid political life and engagement. Not content with showing his own disgust, a recent leader of the country's main opposition party implied that the entire structure was hopeless, and perhaps irredeemable.

A heartfelt personal and emotive response, obviously; yet the message was also "nothing personal" — nobody could conceivably have "won" against the disciplined regiments of globally-driven, neo-liberal wealth and righteousness. In America itself, the non-voting party represents half the electorate, and the constitutional order was profoundly shaken by its inability to elect a president in 2000. A few supreme court judges chose the man who, in 2001, decided to revive the popular spirit with an expeditionary war.

In Saul's view, these are all tragedies of the -ism. He doesn't dispute the real gains of global commerce and expansion. The point is that these have been systematically exaggerated and turned into a pretentious catechism, by corporations, proprietors, banks and their political and cultural servants. Cold war victory was in part engineered by this contemporary mythology, and went on to exalt it farther. In Francis Fukuyama's The End of History and the Last Man [7], the Hegelian dialectic bestowed an academic halo upon this "no alternative" mantra — pleasing American Christians without surrendering too blatantly to their Godly imprecations.

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"America vs Globalisation" (a five-part essay, [January-February 2003](#) [9])

"Britain's tipping-point election" ([June 2005](#) [9])

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Politics and Nations

Yet the signs now are that all these forces have at last overreached themselves, and forced a counter-movement into existence. However, this should not be identified with "anti-globalism" and the [World Social Forum](#) [9]. Without decrying such trends, or the rising significance of non-government organisations, Saul points out they are also ideological in origin — in effect, like globalism's negation or antithesis.

This leads to his main point - that the deeper contradiction that global mania has forced upon the world involves *nations*. Many anti-globalists talk too glibly about nascent communities and networks, while avoiding those already in place: that is, the actual and would-be states betrayed by the castrati, and now routinely dismissed by the current generation of attack-dog columnists, fairground academics and economists — today's equivalents of the "fearful priests so central to the darkest moments of the Middle Ages".

Many national economies may have been partly uplifted, partly wrecked, by the onset of globality. But nations as such show no signs of disappearing. Having knocked over (on a minimal calculation) seven modern empires, survived two world wars, and the cold war, and reimposed themselves in the post-Iraq "solution", they are unlikely to succumb to McDonald burgers or Colonel Sanders chickens. In any city of the globalised world, two minutes with a serious morning paper will deliver the basic story: most global trouble and strife still derives from national liberation wars, struggles and related protests.

Far from "fading away", there are more and more of the damn things, ever more resolved to (in Saul's phrase) "reinvent the world" in their own terms, rather than somebody else's — if necessary by suicidal blood-sacrifice. Hence the regulation of globality has to involve a new deal based on the permanence of "nationalism", rather than its shame-faced exit.

Saul's recipe for this is "rational" or "positive" nationalism. As regards the latter, he remarks: "We are caught up in a human game that is by no means played out" and there is no doubt that "The nation-state will make its comeback". However, this doesn't imply backsliding into the 20th century, for which his description is "negative nationalism".

The point is a double one: first of all, though nationality has not been carried away by globalisation, it has undoubtedly been *transformed* by globality. Since languages don't transform themselves overnight, we still continue using the old "-ism"; but now nationalism is coming to mean something substantially different — above all, because of the phenomenon of mass

migration, and a resultant inescapable cultural hybridity. *The Collapse of Globalism* pays close attention to these changes and their effects.

Secondly, though, even amid such altered circumstances democracy still *begins at home* — within the warp and woof of the many-coloured coat, as it were. It will not be bestowed by postmodern seminars conducted from surveillance helicopters. Peoples will have to do it, not pundits. Saul's idea is put this way:

"We actually know the answer as to how things are going because of our personal experiences, observations and intuition. But a false air of complicity with the way our societies are run is maintained through an atmosphere of busy managers, swirling markets, specialist reassurances and floods of shapeless information...".

He didn't compose this as a portrait of Australian society in late 2005; but still, one has to rub one's eyes.

Australia and Canada

In his 1999 Australian broadcast, as in his new book, Saul argued that the characteristic of globalism's mythology is uncritical praise of formal, "thin" democracy, accompanied by systematic repression and disparagement of everything more, or different. For the fearful priests, constitutional reform to advance or deepen citizenship is worse than unnecessary — it's little better than a return to "class", trade-union tyranny, even socialism, plus a guaranteed lessening of international competitiveness. Since "everything's inevitable, let's just get some nice sort of , you know, not too nasty dictator to look after things...It's not worth not going to the beach if that's all democracy is."

But it's *not* what democracy is: that's his principal and reiterated point. It is of great interest that these strong, passionately argued revisions of both nationalism and democracy come out of Canada. Indeed the references and quotes in *The Collapse of Globalism* show a good deal of the Canadian cultural background to Saul's position.

In many ways Canada may be like Australia: huge, near uninhabitable territories, relatively small and often crowded people-zones, domination by widely separated large cities, marginalised native nations, and dependence on mineral and agricultural exports as well as formal allegiance to the same colonial crown.

However, there is one profound and striking difference. Anglo-Canadian history has been made by and through politics; while on the other hand, avoidance or paralysis of politics has been almost as important in that of Anglo-Australia. The latter's most common theme is distance, or "remoteness". This goes back to the penal settlement era, obviously, but has been represented to the 20th century as Geoffrey Blainey's [10] "tyranny of distance" — forced geographical separation, as a deep cultural influence persisting right into the present. Potent as Blainey's argument is, there is also a metaphorical side to it, which becomes more noticeable in Saul's dissenting perspective. After all, geography alone cannot account for the contrast: New Zealand was even farther away than Australia, yet has ended up with a different kind of state (more like Canada, oddly enough). So it seems more logical to look at deep-seated cultural attitudes, that level of things now usually denoted by "identity" — in the collective (or potentially national) sense.

And on this plane too, a remarkable contrast at once presents itself: Canada was formed by intimate cohabitation with a more powerful and (since the late 19th century) assertive, or even imperial, neighbour. But this is exactly what Australia has lacked, except for the short-lived

Japanese "co-prosperity zone" of the 1941-45 war. Canadians *had no option but* to forge a sustainable, if embattled, "identity"; and this had to be expressed in political (meaning "constitutional") terms, since Big Brother USA was itself a truculent manifestation of that kind. Australians, on the other hand, may have wanted to accomplish something similar, but could do so only in the relative vacuum of "remoteness". In other words, they have had to *will it into existence*. That is, to will an "imagined community" (in Benedict Anderson's [11] famous phrase) in the absence of the typical circumstances or constraints that formed nationalism everywhere else. For the latter, tyrannies of intimacy have tended to predominate. But remoteness has its own rules, which Blainey tried to work out in *The Tyranny of Distance* laws by definition unusual, and possibly unique.

Indispensable identity

The phenomenon of willful identity appears still more remarkable when two other factors are considered — both of them "normal" for modern nationalism, indeed taken for granted most of the time: boundaries and origins. Such traits may always have been around; but post 17th century conditions were to lend them much greater salience. Boundaries were turned into frontiers, while origins became myth histories of communities romantic justifications of the cultures supposedly contained within, and guarded by, a statehood now thought to be natural, indeed universal.

Crowded Europe had been the forge of such changes, certainly; yet they can't for that reason be relegated as merely European. A more global and comparative perspective suggests that many other regions of earth were just as overpopulated, caste-ridden and culturally mixed up. Industrialisation and militarism would probably have produced similar effects had they taken off in (say) Indonesia, the Indian sub-continent, China, southern Africa or Central America. That process had to start somewhere; and the third planet from the sun is too small. Once communication and trading evolved beyond the neolithic stage, any "somewhere" could impact on almost everywhere incredibly rapidly by the standards of biological selection.

The half-exception to the rule was of course the "other planet" chosen as the first-fleet's destination, because of its remoteness — a territory so vast that it had taken the three main maritime empires over a century to chart. Upon that terrain, blood-origins had (and were to retain) a sense quite distinct from the metaphors of social Darwinism, or the German and other synthetic tribalisms of the 20th century. Among its native populations, consanguinity endured from before the neolithic revolution; while among the settlers, "blood" denoted not immemoriality but the livid weal of the penal settlements. Us-and-them boundaries between (approximately) similar nationality groupings were precluded, and took only secondary forms in later colonial formations like Victoria, Tasmania and the others. However, it is cultural and military conflicts linked to such boundaries that have forged most modern national identities — nowhere more clearly than in Canada.

Yet the absence of standard-issue "nationalism" could not prevent the new nation from needing identity. Here it should be kept in mind that "nationalism" is also the name of an international state-system, founded on generally accepted criteria of recognition and participation. From the 18th century onwards, "peoples" were not allowed simply to be, or to "belong", without the protocols of modernity. Where the latter don't apply, "identity" had none the less to be invented. That was the original Australian "proposition".

Such identification once sought to counter history with an ideology of "white Australia", appropriated from social Darwinism. When the latter collapsed, it was replaced by the utterly contrasting idea system of "multi-culturalism". But what these rites of passage have in common is, naturally, the will for identity — an unavoidable desire to "place" Australia in a meaningful

rapport with other cultures. "Recognition" is not an add-on, in modern conditions: it's everyday attire, not a Sunday-best suit. The broader system (now the global system) functions through it. Peoples may live up to aspirations or play down to stereotypes; but none have ever wanted to be without a say in matters of identity, or to allow others to decide what they're worth.

Relating to the Globe

To claim and assert an identity, however, is also to *project* it. Unless others believe and accept what's proclaimed, a community's own subjects are unlikely to feel genuine allegiance. This dimension is one where the Australia-Canada contrast seems even more relevant.

John Ralston Saul's [12] aggressive empiricism and confidence derive from the state which invented "peacekeeping", in the wake of the Suez invasion of 1956. He is himself a "national" public intellectual in a sense that has few equivalents in today's world (and would have none at all, were zealous neo-liberalism to complete its conquest). Nor is this only because he happens to be married to Adrienne Clarkson [13], the twenty-sixth governor-general of Canada until September 2005, a situation that bestowed upon him the absurd title of "vice-regal consort of Canada".

I mentioned earlier the founding conflict with the American union's interpretation of the Enlightenment; but the political *Geist* this nurtured has of course been reinforced by a great "internal frontier" as well — that with and against Quebec, a French-speaking nation that has ceaselessly contested the Anglophone culture, as well as its constitutional rules. Saul's early studies took him to France, and his first book was *Mort d'un Général* (1977, later translated as *Birds of Prey*).

In his influential book *Reflections of a Siamese Twin* (1997 [14]) he wrote: "Canada is either an idea or it does not exist. It is either an intellectual undertaking or it is little more than a resource-rich vacuum lying in the buffer zone just north of a great empire."

The idea there was that Canadian "confederal" complexity — including the royal uniforms — was not only distinct from United States monomania, but a more effective anticipation of what global circumstances are likely to demand. *The Collapse of Globalism* carries on the same undertaking, by voicing stronger rejection of "globaloney", plus some speculation about the transformed nationhood likely to evolve in "the global village" (another Canadian notion, by the way).

Such speculation is (I would argue) properly "parochial": it has far stronger foundations than most other recent crystal ball sessions, because it reflects the country of Quebec, Nunavut, John Kenneth Galbraith and Marshall McLuhan [15]. During the late 1980s and early 1990s Canadian constitutionalism tied itself in knots over the Meech Lake accords, and the problem of defining how many "distinct societies" exist in Canada, and what their entitlements are. The contortions aroused much mockery and "I told you so" among relaxed and comfortable brigades everywhere. Yet in 2005, clambering over the debris of imploded globalism, a different, wry verdict may suggest itself: blessed the land capable of such failures. It may have gone one idea too far, or too ahead of the times; but is it better to be straggling behind the times, thumbs entangled in the discarded rosary of free trade, seeing terrorists round every street corner?

By contrast, the Australian trajectory can be read as showing something else. From quite early on, Australians have tried to interpret their exceptionalism as providential. In his *Australian Colonists* (1974), Ken Inglis [16] quotes "the most widely known of poetic statements about Australian nationality between 1870 and 1900", James Stephens's "She is not yet":

"She is not yet; but he whose ear Thrills to that finer atmosphere Where footfalls of appointed things, Reverberent of days to be, Are heard in forecast echoings..."

Ian Marsh and David Yencken, *Into the Future: the Neglect of the Long Term in Australian Politics* (Public Interest Series & Black Inc., 2004 [17])

The hope was that those very things absent from earlier development might allow a finer future atmosphere to flower — something better than circumscribed identity and negative nationalist mythology. Not having been forced through the identikit straitjacket, could it be that Australia was indeed a lucky country (as the late Donald Horne [18] called it) — somehow awarded direct access to a less encumbered and divided world? Made for "globalism", some have suggested, because freed from the double binds of conventional identity? — "hiding our barren feuds in bloom":

"Till, all our sundering lines with love o'ergrown Our bounds shall be of the girding seas alone."

"Post-Globalism"

We may never know the answer to these beguiling questions. But I must admit that reading *The Collapse of Globalism* makes one sceptical, not just of the poetry but about the persistent impulse behind it. Nationhood is not so easily cheated, or bypassed — either then or now. After all, the corollary of a willed identity had to be the means to voice and articulate collective willpower. In other words, the political domain of a constitution. Not having been forced, this had to be chosen. And what could that choice be but ultra-democratic and egalitarian: a revolution, in terms comparable to other countries, by *sans-culottes* who by the second half of the 19th century had cast off their chains — literally, not in Rousseau's sense? That unmade revolution has haunted the nation that then actually evolved, via the compromises of the 1901 federation.

"Haunted" is more than a metaphor here: there's just no escaping it. No visitor to Australia can escape the unremitting obsession with Australianness, intimately linked to a kind of over-sensitivity, or even paranoia — as if the national identity is *both* something consciously achieved, hence admirable and normal, yet in some quite basic way also deeply uncertain, and still yearned for.

For example, the day I'm typing these words out an article has appeared on *The Age* centrefold by associate editor Shaun Carney: "Advance Australia fair" (19 November 2005 [19]). His argument is that for all its advantages multiculturalism is badly in need of a vitamin supplement boost, something that will "make everyone feel, ultimately, part of a single society". Extra cohesion is required in the face of resentful Muslims, rising immigration numbers and exaggerated individualism — "viewing yourself as somehow not part of society". Carney suggests social and educational policies that might help; but it's the background that will puzzle outsiders.

After all, the 1901 federal constitution is in the vanguard, combining the best of the United Kingdom and United States systems, plus room for reasonable change; or so we were told during the rather lacklustre centenary commemoration four years ago. It may occasionally look like garage-sale Westminsterism plus a made in China DIY kit. But foreigners learn to keep quiet, because criticism is as perilous as denouncing whisky in Scotland.

Also, this identity has received massive boosts since 2001: the direct injection nationalism of the immigration "crisis", followed by a righteous patriotic war in Mesopotamia, for civilised norms presumably embodied in Canberra's constitution, as well as John Howard himself. How can it be that the centre is still not holding? Yet Carney finds himself obliged to sternly remind Age

readers that "Australia is still, in international terms, an immature society, a work in progress....We are in the process of continuing to build our country".

So "she is not yet", even after the Socceroos [20] qualification for the 2006 (soccer) World Cup. What on earth is wrong? If we return to Ken Inglis's classic, some clues may be given by his closing comment on the old poem. In the decades that followed, "the people of six colonies ...would be offered participation in a great war, and from that experience would emerge a solemn festival of nationality". It became easier for Australians to affirm that they had a history not "detached from World history". Remoteness was overcome by *projection* of the nation's meaning to the Dardanelles, and consecrated by a blood-sacrifice on the same distant boundaries.

Scholars have often noted with amazement how nationalist myth is indifferent to time — post-Yugoslav Serb nationalism went back into business, for example, by returning effortlessly over six centuries to the battle of Kosovo in 1389. Anzac Day [21] shows something analogous about space. When and where are both relatively unimportant, for the essential spirit of "identity".

The trouble is, you can't do without it (as Carney reminds us). But this is general knowledge too. Far from fading away, Anzac Day has gained in significance in recent times; by all accounts, young Australians are more enthusiastic than their elders, and go to Gallipoli in increasing numbers to show it. What may count for more is the kind of nationalism symbolised, and how that alters. Saul's "negative nationalism" is narrow, insatiable, tear-mongering, paranoid, irascible and more or less permanently in need of a fix. The post 2001 United States was a laboratory example of how it works (and of its limitations). Governments and party leaders learn how to supply the commodity; and naturally the Australian displacement phenomenon — identity forever endorsed out there — gives plenty of opportunity.

This fixation gave Don Watson [22] his theme in the ironical *Rabbit Syndrome: Australia and America* (2001 [23]) a plea for Australians to give up the immature, "work-in-progress" stuff and simply join the US: "They can go on pretending they're not imperialists, but we won't have to go pretending our soul's our own... ". As editor Peter Craven put it, this essay played to "all our fundamental fears, including the most terrifying of all, that we shall cease to exist because we have never been".

And "positive nationalism"? Saul's argument is that globality, not to be confused with its -ism, impels peoples towards a greener, more democratic, accountable, participatory and public formula. Making their soul their own is essentially a constitutional question, and involves acknowledging "major failings in the formal political system". Some elements of the unmade revolution need to be retrieved, by outward-looking, patient reform, and the construction of a political system less "at odds with our real situation and our real needs".

This demands more politics, not less, and an earth-shift towards a national identity that does not need to seek revalidation of its meaning on distant shores, additional blood-sacrifice, or fulsome applause from the great powers of the moment. By these criteria, Australia joined in the Iraqi crusade for outdated motives, to rekindle a makeshift identity formed by remoteness (and of course, Canada refused, in spite of the North American Free Trade Agreement [24]). But globality has really dispelled re-moteness, and a different, more democratic identity should be on Shaun Carney's agenda. It's no use decrying nationalism as such. More plausibly, John Ralston Saul's positive brand might be the answer: a nationalism of the global village, rather than of the windjammer and the desert.

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