On a recent visit to London, a young Australian thinker addressed an intimate seminar chaired by Jon Cruddas and held talks with Ed Miliband. Why is the Labour leadership so fascinated by Tim Soutphommasane?

My country right or wrong

By George Eaton

One afternoon in June a small group of Labour MPs, think tank heads and academics gathered in a cramped Commons committee room to listen to a young Australian named Tim Soutphommasane. He was in Westminster at the invitation of Jon Cruddas, the intellectually ambitious Dagenham MP who is leading Labour’s policy review, and Jonathan Rutherford, the editor of the left-wing journal Soundings and one of the theorists behind “Blue Labour”.

Among those in attendance were David Miliband; Hilary Benn, the shadow communities secretary; Sunder Katwala, the director of the think tank British Future; Anthony Barnett, the first director of Charter 88 and the founder of openDemocracy; and David Goodhart, the director of Demos. In Katwala’s view, though the left had discussed the question of national identity for years, it remained “stuck on the starting line”. Too often the debate had been about whether to have the debate at all. Soutphommasane’s call for a less apologetic, more unambiguous patriotism could offer the left a way forward. In a sign of how seriously the Labour leadership is taking his ideas, he met Ed Miliband during his stay in London.

When I met Soutphommasane (pronounced Soot-pom-ma-sarn) for coffee he was dressed smartly in a dark suit, pressed white shirt and Versace glasses. We talked about his 2009 book Reclaiming Patriotism: Nation-Building for Australian Progressives and he explained his vision of a new “liberal patriotism”.

There was a time when a sense of patriotism was unremarkable on the British left. Clement Attlee described it as “the emotion of every free-thinking Briton”. Yet, in recent decades, the British left’s relationship with patriotism has been ambivalent at best and hostile at worst. When Ed Miliband delivered his first (and cautious) speech on the subject in June, many Labour supporters were baffled. “Australia and Britain have in common a progressive left that is uncomfortable with the subject of national identity and patriotism because invocations of national pride and solidarity are regarded as proxies for racism and xenophobia,” Soutphommasane told me.

Indeed, one of the stock responses to anyone on the left who engages with the subject is to accuse him or her of “dog-whistling”, a term that originated in Australian politics to describe the use of coded words and themes to appeal to racist voters. “There can be more than one kind of patriotism,” he explained. “For a lot of people, patriotism is, by definition, an exclusive and a very nasty sentiment, when there can in fact be a very appreciative and generous love of country, one in which you can criticise your own country when you think it’s in the wrong. That’s the kind of political community, I think, that the left should try and work towards – one that’s mature, one that’s reflective and one that’s more deliberative.”

His lodestar is Carl Schurz, the first German-born American elected to the US Senate, whose motto was: “My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right.”

History of sacrifice

One of the first things you notice about Soutphommasane, who is 29, is that, in his own words, he “does not look like an obvious advocate for patriotism”. He was born in 1982 in Montpellier, France, to Lao and Chinese parents. They had fled Laos as refugees following the Communist takeover in 1975. In 1985 the family migrated from France to Australia, where his parents, “who never really felt that they could belong to French society”, became registered nurses at a hospital in west Sydney. Reclaiming Patriotism is dedicated to them for teaching their son “the value of citizenship and the meaning of calling a country your home.”
He declined the opportunity to take up French citizenship at the age of 18 because, he told me, “I don’t believe in the idea of dual citizenship.” When I referred to him as a “second-generation migrant”, he swiftly corrected me: “I’m a first-generation Australian.”

Soutphommasane was educated at the Hurstville Agricultural High School in south-west Sydney, a predominantly Anglo-Celtic institution that “took its patriotism pretty seriously”. Its most celebrated alumnus is John Hurst Edmondson, the first Australian to be awarded the Victoria Cross during the Second World War.

Soutphommasane was the only Asian pupil at the school. He cites an Anzac Day ceremony as an event that shaped his thinking about national identity. “I remember hearing a fellow student talk about the sacrifices of our forebears and how the Australian way of life was defended by Australian servicemen. These were all noble sentiments but I couldn’t relate to them in any way because my forebears never fought any wars on behalf of Australia and the kind of forebears the student was talking about may well have been fighting to defend a white Australia. That, for me, crystallised the problem of what a national identity means in a society where a common history can’t be taken for granted.

“I’ve since reconciled myself with the idea of a national identity and tradition but that’s because I think belonging to a country means belonging to a tradition and trying to live up to the best of it. You can inherit a tradition even though you’re not born into it.”

It is a moving backstory and one that makes Soutphommasane a formidable advocate for patriotism. He joined the Australian Labor Party when he was 15, the minimum age required, after being politicised by statements made by Pauline Hanson, the demagogic leader of the anti-immigrant One Nation Party, who denounced the “Asian invasion” of Australia.

At the same time, after the election of John Howard’s Liberal-National coalition in 1996, the centre right had redefined national identity in starkly conservative terms. Howard, who as leader of the opposition in 1988 had called for Asian immigration to be “slowed down a little”, mocked the left’s “black armband” view of Australian history and notoriously denied a group of Afghan asylum-seekers on board the Norwegian freighter MV Tampa entry to the country’s waters in 2001.

The response by much of the Australian left was to concede defeat and abandon any attempt to forge a liberal patriotism. The UK experienced a similar phenomenon during the rise of Thatcherism. “When the right has a resonant version of patriotism, the left seems to decide that’s authentic,” Sunder Katwala said when we spoke.

In the case of Australia, the situation reached its nadir with the Cronulla Beach riots in Sydney in 2005, during which a mob of 5,000 attacked anyone of Middle Eastern appearance. By now a PhD student at Balliol College, Oxford (his eventual thesis was titled Patriotism and National Culture), Soutphommasane was “outraged” by “the xenophobia that was unleashed and the use of national symbols like the flag”. He felt vindicated in his view that the left could not “vacate the field or leave the debate to the extremists”. He completed his studies in 2009 and returned to Australia with a renewed sense of political purpose.

Soutphommasane first met Cruddas in 2008 while still at Oxford and began corresponding regularly with him. He praised the Labour MP’s Clement Attlee Memorial Lecture, delivered in October last year, as a ”very original contribution to political thinking on the British Labour left. Looking at the debates around Blue Labour, I saw a conversation that Australian Labor should have had after it lost office [in 1996] and never had during its period in opposition [from 1996 to 2007].”

Cruddas, a keen student of Australian politics since his days as a trade union activist with the Australian Builders Labourers’ Federation, told me that he was keen to “pull together ideas from a wide international orbit”. Of Soutphommasane, he said: “He’s an ex-adviser to Bob Carr, the Australian foreign minister and the former premier of New South Wales; he’s a public commentator [Soutphommasane is a regular columnist for the Age newspaper in Melbourne] and he’s a philosopher. He’s a genuine intellectual – he’s not just in the academy, he works at both the practical and the theoretical levels.”

Others remark on his persistence. Justin Di Lollo, the managing director of the Labor-aligned lobbying firm Hawker Britton, who employed Soutphommasane after he graduated, said: “He was a very forward kinda young fella. In his early twenties he ran up to me more or less asking for a job. I was a bit slow off the mark and Tim went through his Labor Party connections to put pressure on my team to make it all happen. He showed Machiavellian intent and capability.”

For Soutphommasane, it is in the left’s best interest to promote a common national identity. “One of the reasons why you need to have a cohesive, collective identity in any liberal democratic society is that you need to have a sense of fellow feeling in order to redistribute resources.” Because most societies have become more ethnically and culturally diverse, “You can’t take it for granted that citizens will have an identity in common or will be willing to contribute to the common good, and so ♦
you have to work hard to ensure that people feel like they belong to a community." In Britain, he observed, "it’s harder because of a historical legacy which meant the British population never had to reflect very deeply about what it meant to be British. The fact that you had British imperial power meant that you didn’t need to think about Britishness at all.”

In this regard, Soutphommasane praises the Labour leader’s "nuanced attempt at starting a new conversation around Britishness. There will be the inevitable criticisms and reservations expressed on the Labour side, but these are important things to talk about.”

In some respects, as Katwala pointed out, Soutphommasane’s thesis is a "statement of the obvious". The Labour Party, Katwala said, has "mostly had an account of patriotism; it’s the cultural liberal left, the post-'68 generation, that’s had an aversion to national identity [and] an allergy to patriotism".

When I challenged Soutphommasane on whether his model of patriotism is applicable to Britain, a multinational state with a monarch as its head of state, he said: "The most striking thing about Britain is how historically successful it has been at holding together a number of constituent identities – Englishness, Scottishness, Welshness. I think that’s something that isn’t always appreciated. Are there tensions between these identities in Britishness? Potentially, yes. But an overarching British identity can also be strengthened by vigorous constituent identities.”

The great strength of Britishness, Soutphommasane argues, is that it "leaves a lot of space for the expression of other identities”. He is, however, critical of the British model of multiculturalism and its promotion of a “community of communities”.

“"The implication of that is that there’s no overarching sense of British community. If multiculturalism is to work, it has to be about ensuring that people from diverse backgrounds can integrate into a common community as citizens.” Too often, the result has been what the philosopher Amartya Sen calls “plural monoculturalism”. He contrasted Britain’s approach unfavourably with that of Australia, where multiculturalism "has very clearly been framed as a citizenship policy”. He continued: "Everyone in Australia should have the right to express their cultural identity and heritage as a right of citizenship but this should be accompanied by a responsibility to adhere to certain civic values such as parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, equality of the sexes and freedom of speech and to learn the national language.”

Soutphommasane sits on the board of the National Australia Day Council and says that "affirmation ceremonies” are an example of the country’s active citizenship policy. Australians who attend naturalisation ceremonies as observers are invited to join in “affirming” their loyalty to the country. "For me, that kind of ritual symbolises the civic bond that a community should share. I’ve seen hard-nosed cynics go to these ceremonies and leave feeling quite emotional and moved by it.”

Where the Australian Labor government has disappointed, he said, is in its failure to tell a “national story”. “The Rudd-Gillard governments have great achievements to their name – the apology to the indigenous people, the establishment of a carbon pricing scheme, the creation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, a massive school-building programme – but they’ve lacked a nation-building story, they’ve lacked a nation-building project.”

It is this insight that has excited Cruddas, who believes that Soutphommasane’s concept of “nation-building” could act as a “framing device” for Labour’s current policy review.

“Labour only successfully appeals when it actually owns an alternative national story based around what a country could be,” the MP said. “And that’s why we invited Tim into our policy review. Through the idea of ‘rebuilding Britain’
Wonderland: Danny Boyle’s direction of the Olympic opening ceremony gave a “sense of Britain as a project”

you could counterpose a sense of national obligatory duty to one of managed decline.” What Labour needs to contest, Cruddas argued, is “a shrill, sour Englishness based on loss and abandonment”.

A month later, as I watched the opening ceremony for the London Olympic Games, I thought again of Southphommasane. In its humour, wit and largeness of spirit, Danny Boyle’s Isles of Wonder pageant exemplified the “open and generous” patriotism of which the young Australian had spoken.

“What most impressed me [about the opening ceremony],” Southphommasane says now, “was how he [Boyle] conveyed this sense of Britain as a project. I suspect many people in Britain associate notions of a national project with something American or New World; but perhaps this may now change. This might just be the cultural legacy of these Olympics – giving Britain a new confidence and an ability to speak about itself, to itself.”

Renew the vow

With its representation of the suffragettes, the jarrow marchers, Windrush immigrants, the National Health Service and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the ceremony offered a people’s history of Britain that the left instinctively understood and applauded. Afterwards, the conservative journalist Toby Young wrote that he felt as if he had just watched “a £27m party political broadcast for the Labour Party”.

I asked Southphommasane how Miliband’s party could harness a new wave of left-wing patriotism. “Sometimes political parties can let these moments do the work for them,” he said. “But the patriotic goodwill generated by the Olympics does provide an opportunity for Labour. It is almost as though Boyle has managed to pave the way for a new chapter of British nation-building.”

In his masterful 1941 essay “The Lion and the Unicorn”, George Orwell wrote of how the Second World War had made the creation of a distinctly English socialism both possible and necessary. The antiquated class system was hampering the war effort and the Conservative establishment lacked the moral authority to demand sacrifices for the common good. The present situation is not dissimilar. The Conservative-led coalition’s unbalanced austerity programme has deprived David Cameron of any claim to be a One Nation Tory and has forced the abandonment of the wartime-like slogan “We’re all in this together”.

Cruddas describes the government’s strategy as “destructive”, rather than conservative. “In terms of what they’re doing to the military, to the NHS, to the welfare state, which are the products of the endeavours of previous generations, they’re unravelling the essential fabric of this country,” he told me.

In Southphommasane’s view, Ed Miliband could yet succeed where his Australian counterparts failed and develop a convincing “nation-building story”. “The task of rebuilding and reshaping the British economy after the financial crisis and after austerity is something that could be a patriotic project,” he says.

In 1945, Clement Attlee campaigned on the promise of building a “new Jerusalem” in post-war Britain. Nearly 70 years later, a patriotic vow to “rebuild Britain” has the potential once again to sweep Labour to power. 

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Towards a New Jerusalem
Clement Attlee

Before the war there was increasing disequilibrium between town and country and here, too, you had those depressed areas. All that has gone and you see today a more prosperous countryside than we have ever had … The crucial question of this election, on which every elector must make up his or her mind, is this: what kind of society do you want? We know the kind of society we want. We want a society of free men and women – free from poverty, free from fear, able to develop to the full their faculties in co-operation with their fellows, everyone giving and having the opportunity to give service to the community, everyone regarding his own private interest in the light of the interest of others, and of the community; a society bound together by rights and obligations, rights bringing obligations, obligations fulfilled bringing rights; a society free from gross inequalities and yet not regimented nor uniform.

Our opponents, on the other hand, regard the economic process primarily as giving an opportunity to the individual to advance his own interests; community interests, national interests, are regarded as a hypothetical by-product. Their motto is: “The world is my oyster; each one for himself.”

The result of that policy can be seen by all. There was the army of the poor; there were the slums; there was beautiful Britain defiled for gain; there were derelict areas. The fruits of our policy can be seen in the new fine generation that is growing up, in the new houses – because we have done a great work in housing. You hear only of the people who are not satisfied. The people who are snug in a council house do not write to you about it.

The fact is that a very remarkable job has been done under great difficulties. You see our new towns, you see our smiling countryside. I am proud of our achievement. There is an immense amount more to do. Remember that we are a great crusading body, armed with a fervent spirit for the reign of righteousness on earth. Let us go forward in this fight in the spirit of William Blake:

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England’s green and pleasant land. 

This is an extract from Attlee’s speech to the 1951 Labour conference in Scarborough