

Embracing multicultural voices can lead to a more democratic future

Written by Duncan Ivison, Professor of Political Philosophy, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research), University of Sydney

This is the seventh and final article in a series in which philosophers discuss the greatest moral challenge of our time, and how we should address it. Read part one [here](#), part two [here](#), part three

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One of the great moral challenges of our time is the rising tide of inequality in liberal democracies around the world. This includes Australia, where both [income and wealth inequality are increasing](#), especially the latter.

There are arguments about the rise of China and other authoritarian regimes threatening the viability of liberal democracy. But a deeper problem is the persistent inability of liberal democracies to live up to their own moral promise. That promise is one anchored deeply in the fundamental equality and freedom of their citizens.

It's not that liberal democracy is going to collapse anytime soon. But there are deep fissures emerging that constitute a fundamental moral challenge to its flourishing.

In many ways, this has been a contested feature of liberal democracy from its inception. Indeed, it embodies, at its heart, a philosophical quandary that was articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract* back in 1762: how is it possible to reconcile freedom and equality with power?

Are we asking too much of liberal democracy?

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Many contemporary political scientists argue that we shouldn't confuse liberal democracy with social justice. At best, it offers a peaceful means for the transfer of political authority, converting real stones into the "paper stones" of ballots.

This kind of minimalist democracy might be the most we can hope for. However, I believe liberal democracy, in any meaningful sense of the term, will not survive in the long run if it doesn't embody a commitment to its citizens' basic equality. And this is increasingly under threat today, from at least two directions.

First, income and wealth inequality remain stubbornly entrenched. Second, deep social and cultural change is transforming liberal democratic politics.

Read more: [*Don't shoot the messenger when confronted with inconvenient ideas*](#)

Previously dominant groups, such as white, working class men, are being challenged. And their values are being overtaken by the rise of alternative values, often linked to claims for racial and gender equality, multiculturalism and human rights.

It is a complicated story, as [Pippa Norris](#) has demonstrated. But one consequence of these changes is that the conditions required for achieving equality are now also changing. Nowhere is this truer than at the complex intersection of history, race, gender and economic inequality.

Identity and democracy

The particular moral challenge facing liberal democracy that should worry us most, then, is the intersection between inequality, history and the drivers of these shifting values.

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We need to be careful not to misdiagnose the challenge. Many commentators are laying the blame for the disenchantment with liberal democracy at the feet of “identity politics”. I think this is a mistake, but it is a mistake worth unpacking.

The thesis that liberal democracy is being undone by identity politics is perhaps best exemplified by Mark Lilla’s bracing [The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics](#). It can also be found, to differing extents, in Edward Luce’s [The Retreat of Western Liberalism](#) and Amy Chua’s [Political Tribes](#).

The basic argument of these books is that the rise of multiculturalism and the clamour for “recognition” by minority groups is undermining the social solidarity required for the realisation of social justice, and consequently the very idea of liberal democracy itself.

Read more: [We must develop 'techno-wisdom' to prevent technology from consuming us](#)

I think these claims are deeply misguided. On one level, they are correct: there are deep divisions within our communities that need to be addressed. And social solidarity is indeed a vital component for the sustainability of the kind of social democratic welfare state many liberals support.

But multiculturalism and the rise of movements such as [Black Lives Matter](#) in the United States, and initiatives such as the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#) in Australia, are an expression of a vibrant, democratic equality, not a repudiation of it.

These movements have emerged precisely at the intersection of both identity claims and

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persistent structural inequalities that liberalism has failed to address. More importantly, they prefigure a possible future for liberal democracy.

Imagining the future of liberal democracy

Consider the recent Uluru Statement, which includes two crucial components. First, it is a clear call to acknowledge a history of dispossession and injustice in a truthful way, from the heart. But at the same time it also contains an offer for what could be an innovative way to address the legacies of those injustices.

Breaking free from many of the stagnant moves in Australia's national debate centred around reconciliation and token gestures of recognition, the Uluru Statement calls for a "First Nations voice" to be enshrined in the Constitution, as well as "Makarrata", an agreement making process to re-establish political relations on more just terms.

Read more: [*We need to rethink our moral obligations to create a better world*](#)

This is a generous and deeply democratic proposal. A call framed in action, in movement towards change, rather than a reiteration of tired platitudes. It seeks to address, simultaneously, both the deep structural inequalities that Indigenous people face, but also calls for a democratic voice and political engagement, not withdrawal.

Can it create a genuine common ground for new forms of social solidarity across Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities? Much will depend on the ability of our liberal democratic institutions to respond to these new possibilities.

Social and economic inequality is a serious threat to the sustainability of liberal democracy. It cannot be addressed by declaring that identity claims are democratically suspect. Nor will inequality be overcome without grasping the complex overlay between history, culture and economic disadvantage that exists in so many communities today.

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It turns out that there are genuine possibilities for change prefigured in some of the most vital political movements of our time. The real challenge is whether we have the vision and capacity to grasp the opportunities already before us.

Duncan Ivison receives funding from the Australian Research Council.

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