

History in the Howard Era

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Thank you for inviting me to speak on this most important topic. In this talk I want to outline what I see as the Howard Government's policy on history, look at some ways in which the policy has been implemented, and then make some suggestions as to how historians ought to respond.

Howard Government History Policy

The most well known statement of Howard's history policy is the one he made when delivering the Sir Robert Menzies lecture on 18 November 1996, when he said we must "ensure that our history as a nation is not written definitively by those who take the view that we should apologise for most of it.... I believe that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed. In saying that I do not exclude or ignore specific aspects of our past where we are rightly held to account. Injustices were done in Australia and no-one should obscure or minimize them."¹

This notion of balance was reiterated in his Australia day speech this year when he noted a social attitudes report which found that fewer Australians are ashamed of this nation's past than a decade ago. "I welcome this corrective in our national sense of self. It restores a better balance between pride in our past and recognition of past wrongs." After acknowledging the mistakes and injustices of our past, especially in relation to Indigenous peoples, he went on to say, "our goal must be to strive for a balance in questions of national identity and cultural diversity"²

Why has Howard talked so consistently of balance in history? Why does history matter to him and to the government he heads? What does he really mean?

Historical Background

To understand Howard's use of history, we need, of course, to go back, to the time of the Hawke and Keating governments, when Howard was in opposition, and from 1985 to 1989 and again in 1995 leader of the opposition. Two historians, Mark McKenna and Sean Brawley, have written excellent analyses of these politician's wars over history, and I'm indebted to both.³

Conservative commentators in the late 1980s were becoming especially hostile to Manning Clark, whom they saw as consigning them to the dustbin of history. And indeed Clark did refer to them as "clock back putters" and "money changers". He said on 25 January 1988 that Australians were ready to face the truth about their past, "to acknowledge that the coming of the British was the occasion of three great evils: the violence against the original inhabitants....; the violence against... the convicts; and the violence done to the land itself."⁴ Although Clark did go on to warn against the dangers of oversimplification, of history degenerating into the division of humanity into goodies

and baddies, it was his identification of Australian nationalism and national identity with the Labour tradition and of the horrors of British imperialism with the conservatives that the latter noticed, remembered, and as time went on, explicitly opposed. As Mark McKenna points out, during the 1980s Geoffrey Blainey had countered by developing a criticism of what he would later call the Black Armband view of history. He criticised the multicultural lobby, and those historians and others who saw Australia's history as "largely the story of violence, exploitation, repression, racism, sexism, capitalism, colonialism and a few other isms". John Hirst in the *IPA Review* criticised the "black school" of Australian history. In his 1988 statement, *Future Directions*, Howard said he wanted to see "one Australia proud of its heritage". In the Hawke years, he said, "people's confidence in their nation's past came under attack as the professional purveyors of guilt attacked Australia's heritage and people were told they should apologise for pride in their culture, traditions, institutions and history".⁵

The debate sharpened in the Keating years. In 1992, several very important events happened. One occurred early that year, soon after the Queen's visit to Australia. When Keating was attacked by the opposition for his handling of the Queen, Keating struck back by saying it was the Opposition that were the relics from the past, remaining British to their bootstraps despite Britain's decision not to help Australia defend itself against the Japanese advance in 1942. The Liberal and National parties, he said, "are the same old fogies who doffed their lids and tugged the forelock to the British establishment". John Howard, then in opposition, responded that this was "an orgy of Pom-bashing" for political purposes.⁶

Yet Opposition interest in such debates was still relatively minor. Sean Brawley argues that their attitude changed after they lost the unlosable election in 1993. In that context, there was some soul searching that they had come to be seen as caring only about economics, and had lost touch with public thinking on social and political issues. Keating's success in positioning himself as the inheritor of what is truly Australian, and the conservatives as representing a backward-looking relic of the past, imbued with loyalty to Britain rather than to modern Australia, energized Howard and other Liberals to take history seriously. Howard became increasingly convinced that Keating's use of history was a real problem; in a speech in November 1993 he accused Keating of "the unashamed use of his version of history to promote a modern day political argument". Paul Keating, he continued, "is also intent on marginalizing the liberal/conservative contribution to Australian history and the Australian achievement".⁷

As Brawley points out, Howard began developing his counter attack. In a range of speeches he set out especially to rehabilitate the memory of Menzies and of the Liberal Party more generally. From the time of his election, elected, his defence was less a matter of defending the Liberal party than of defending Australian history as a whole, as something largely to be proud of, with the negative aspects a very small part of the overall story. His speeches relied heavily on Geoffrey Blainey's critique of black armband history.⁸

And so we return to his statement of November 1996, of defending Australia's history as one of heroic achievement, and suggesting that "we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed". Now the Howard government was not at all unusual in seeking to encourage a view of Australian history that suited his own political philosophy. His emphasis is on the Australian nation

as a unified entity, whose internal diversity and occasional blemishes do not detract from its overall history of heroic achievement.

Implementing the Policy

If the Howard government is not unusual in seeking to use history for its own ends, it does so in a particular way, and I think it's important to recognize that way, to be alert to its subtleties, nuances, purposes, and meanings. What consequences does his policy of emphasizing the importance of history and 'restoring the balance' have in practical terms that affect historians? How best can we as professional historians continue our work while living with this government? To what extent should we welcome government policy, oppose it, or ignore it?

We can sometimes see policy better in what a government does than it what it says. Let's look at Howard's history policy in four main arenas: teaching history, the funding of public commemorations, heritage policy, and Aboriginal policy. We need to remember of course in this analysis our federal system, and that on many of these issues the states are at least as important as, if not more so, the Commonwealth government.

Teaching history

In his Australia Day speech, having made a general point about balance, Howard went on to say: "I believe the time has also come for root and branch renewal of the teaching of Australian history in our schools, both in terms of the numbers learning and the way it is taught." He referred to the displacement of history by supposedly more relevant subjects and went on to say history is now taught "without any sense of structured narrative, replaced by a fragmented stew of 'themes' and 'issues' it has succumbed to a postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated. . . . The subject matter should include indigenous history. . . . (and also) the great and enduring heritage of Western civilization".

History teachers and historians have reacted variously to Howard's call, many welcoming the call for more attention to history in schools but wary of any suggestion of government intervention in prescribing what kind of history ought to be taught. At the time, Howard was supported by the newly appointed Federal Education Minister, Julie Bishop, saying she would like to see Australian students develop the sense of pride in learning about their nation's history that American students did. She said few students are learning about Australian history, as history has fallen victim to a crowded curriculum. "Currently", she said, "it tends to be in themes, it tends to be fragmented, the narrative of Australian history is so important".⁹ More recently on 5 July, she followed up these remarks with a major statement on the teaching of history, repeating her earlier point about the crowded curriculum, and specifically advocating a return to the teaching of history as a stand alone course rather than buried within courses on social and environmental studies. On the question of the type of history that should be taught, she said it was important not to "downplay the overwhelmingly positive aspects of the Australian achievement", and expressing concern that in current history teaching "there is too much political bias". She also took up the Prime Minister's earlier stress on narrative over themes, when she said "it is important for students to develop a body of knowledge that is rich in dates, facts and events, and from which students can then draw their own opinions about historical events. . . . Students are missing knowledge about key historical

events and their influence on our nation's development". She announced that she would explore ways for the Federal government to encourage State education authorities and all schools to make the teaching of Australian history a critical part of their jurisdiction's syllabuses.¹⁰

Bishop is calling together a number of historians and history teachers to a History Summit on 17 August, to advise her on these issues. She will be concentrating, she says, on the "sensible centre in the history wars". Historians invited and accepted include Tom Stannage, Jenny Gregory, Geoffrey Bolton, Inga Clendinnen, John Gascoigne, Jackie Huggins, Mark Lopez, Peter Stanley, Greg Melleuish, and John Hirst. Tony Taylor, director of the Monash-based National Centre for History Education, will provide a position paper on the current state of history teaching in schools and Greg Melleuish will provide one on the essentials of Australian history. The summit will, according to the Minister, "identify the basic facts and building blocks of Australian history that every student should have an appreciation of". She has no intention of creating an official history, she says.¹¹ The response has been varied, with Bob Carr one of those supporting and invited to the summit, but the leader of the Opposition Kim Beazley expressing opposition to Bishop's proposals on the grounds that it was an "elite preoccupation", and that the education ministers needed to focus on what really matters, that is on "encouraging young men and women into trades".¹² Which is a shame, as in his own personal history Kim Beazley has shown much more interest in history than Howard ever did.

As historians, I think we need to watch these developments closely. The Minister's statements are rather contradictory for us, I think. In one sense, we can see the statements and the history summit as a delayed response to the Report of the National Inquiry into School History, presented to the government in 2000, commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) in September 1999 and written by Tony Taylor and others. The report made several recommendations, including the holding a national seminar on history in schools, much like the history summit that is now proposed. It also drew attention to the need to upgrade the role of history in schools, give it a stronger focus, allow for more in depth study, and direct resources to teacher training and professional and curriculum development accordingly. New South Wales has been much less affected than other states, with history mandatory in years 7 and 8, and Australian history mandatory in years 9 and 10, but here, as elsewhere, senior studies in history have declined and the discipline has been in some difficulty in the school context. The report makes an important point, reiterated by Anna Clark in *The Age* on Saturday, that what is actually taught depends on the teachers in the classroom. The report also recommended the establishment of a National Centre for History Education; this was done and Taylor appointed its director.¹³

All this is very welcome, if delayed. On the more worrying side, there is more than a hint that the Federal government will attempt to influence what kind of history is taught, and that it will be a form of history which will be nationalistic and simplistic. Many historians would echo Stuart Macintyre's remarks in an ABC interview that "We need to do more to restore history, but we need to make sure that that is open to diverse viewpoints and that it is not simply an exercise in indoctrination."¹⁴

Yet again, we need an historical perspective. Graeme Davison points out that the complaint that history is neglected in Australian schools is a perennial one. He reminds

us that in the 1890s Henry Lawson bemoaned the lack of Australian history in schools, and that the matter was of concern to the Keating government as much as the Howard government.¹⁵ A century later, in 1993, a survey conducted by the Civic Experts Group appointed by the Keating government pointed to the high levels of ignorance of the country's history and constitution. The report of that group in 1994 affirmed the importance of history as a foundation for citizenship, and recommended both a pluralist and international perspective. Presaging the more recent complaints about a fragmented stew, the report argued that the history of Australians should be based in narrative so that students "will gain a sense of change over time", as well as being "comparative and reflective" so that Australian history is placed in a larger context.¹⁶ This was a report commissioned by and reporting to the Keating government. Little wonder, then, that so many historians are puzzled by the current equation of narrative with conservatism, and 'themes' with either postmodernism or leftist critique.

In any case, as anyone who has ever written history knows, this is a false opposition. Chronology and narrative mean nothing without themes, and themes are ahistorical without chronology and narrative. For most of us, we wrestle with finding a way to give the chronological spine of the story, the sense of sequence and what led to what, at the same time as developing an analysis which helps make sense of the detailed events we describe. It is not an easy thing to do, but we all know that these two aspects of history are two sides of the same coin. In any case, both Howard and Bishop have their own themes, as they very clearly state: while acknowledging the dark side placing emphasis on inculcating pride in Australian history, that is, shifting the emphasis from critique to celebration.

The Militarisation of History

A second area where we can see Howard government's history policy at work is in what we might call the militarization of Australian History. Stephen Muecke has pointed out that although the Howard government spokespeople sometimes spoke of forgetting about the past, or about moving on, they meant it very selectively. They were all for remembering the past when Anzac Day was involved, or military commemoration more generally.¹⁷

Marilyn Lake drew attention to this in a recent paper. She points out that in the last ten years, the federal government through massive funding of the Department of Veteran's Affairs and the Australian War memorial has actively promoted public knowledge and understanding of Australia's military heritage and its importance in shaping the nation. DVA now spends million of dollars each year in the "Saluting their Service" program, inaugurated in 2002, which aims to: raise community awareness, educate younger Australians about our wartime heritage and its importance in the development of our nation, preserve war memorials and memorabilia in communities across the country, and ensure national days such as Anzac Day and Remembrance Day are commemorated in an appropriate manner.¹⁸

Yet as in the case of school history, we cannot identify this as purely a Howard government phenomenon, for the boost to war commemoration grew apace under the Keating Government. In 1994, that government launched an ambitious program to commemorate the end of World War II, in a program that became known as "Australia Remembers". Before then, there was no national commemoration program focused on

remembering military history. There was attention to the proper commemoration of individuals in gravestone or memorial, and there was a research service for next of kin, but the kind of public program that developed in 1995 under Australian Remembers was quite new. The Howard Government continued the emphasis on public commemoration, with substantial funding to the DVA and the War Memorial especially for this purpose. In 2002 this program was stepped up, with a new program called “Saluting their Service”, with more explicitly educational aims, with the purpose of creating greater community appreciation of the contribution of Australia’s service men and women, especially in conflicts since the Second World War. The Department has provided education resources to every school in Australia, spent a lot on developing websites, and in 2004, distributed *Working the Web: Investigating Australia’s Wartime History* to all schools.¹⁹

Heritage Policy

A third field where we can see Howard government history policy at work is in heritage policy. When my talk was advertised, I received an email from Bruce Pennay, a practising heritage and historical consultant, apologising for missing this talk but hoping I would talk about Howard’s heritage policy. And he is right of course; this is an important dimension of Howard government’s history policy. Pennay expressed concern about the way under the Howard government, the new National Heritage List displaced the former Register of the National Estate. Whereas the former Register, he explained, grew like Topsy from a range of sources, including the National Trust and local and state heritage lists, the new National Heritage List is much more restrictive. It sets very high thresholds of significance, so that an item must be nominated as of outstanding heritage value to the nation. Two sites Pennay nominated, the Bonegilla Reception and Training Centre and the Albury Railway Station, Yard and Bridge across the Murray River, still await a response, while sites relating to Don Bradman, Captain Cook, and Ned Kelly have been listed.

In a detailed paper called “Playing Politics with the Federal Heritage Regime”, Deb Wilkinson and Andrew Macintosh, research fellows at the Australia Institute, located in Canberra and funded by grants from philanthropic trusts, memberships and commissioned research, investigate the Federal Government’s decisions to distribute heritage funding to Bradman-related projects in July 2005. They conclude that these decisions show evidence of direct political intervention and interference, “raising questions about whether the Federal Government has inappropriately sought to exploit Sir Donald Bradman’s name and reputation for political purposes”. The authors conclude that the evidence of impropriety is so strong that the responsibility for decisions should be transferred from the minister to an independent statutory authority.²⁰ While I am not an expert on this matter, it does seem that the government seeks to use Bradman as a legitimating historical figure for the conservative side of politics.

Aboriginal Policy

Perhaps it is in the area of Aboriginal policy where the Howard government’s history policy is most evident. Keating’s Redfern speech of 1992 went further than any other government had done in recognizing non-indigenous people’s agency in the past in the displacement, institutionalization, and destruction of the foundations of life of

Aboriginal people. Furthermore, the Keating government took seriously the possibility that wrongs committed in the past might require restitution in the present, commissioning the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to inquire into the history of child removal and to recommend on its consequences. As well all know, the Keating government was out and Howard was in by the time the Commission reported. Yet it was a powerful report which had a major impact on the understanding of many Australians of the enormity of what had happened not too many decades earlier. I don't have time to trace the many twists and turns of Howard government's Aboriginal policy; here I will simply stress what I see as its key elements.

First: minimize, but do not do away with entirely, recognition of past injustices towards Aboriginal people. There is in fact room for empathy with the plight of indigenous people in terms of disadvantage. It is on this ground that Keith Windschuttle has been least successful. Conservative commentators including Ron Brunton, Alan Atkinson, and John Hirst, alongside many others of varying political persuasions, have parted company with him for his lack of compassion, his assertion of the point of view of the nineteenth century settler in a battle zone, his refusal to recognise the point of view of the indigenous peoples of the country. Yet if there is room for empathy, it is equally important that the past be separated rigidly from the present; anything bad that happened was long ago, and has little or nothing to do with us now. There is a general command to forget about the past, to get on with it, to move on. There is no sense of reparation.

Second: consonant with this minimization is a return to the politics of assimilation and reject more recent ideals of self-determination, autonomy, and the need for a treaty. The assimilationist tradition places white Australia as the true Australians, and includes others only in so far as they adopt the values and habits of white Australians. The history of assimilation policies is itself rehabilitated, paving way for assimilationist policies in the present. The notion of rights is avoided and side-stepped.

Implications for historians

Fortunately, historians are not entirely dependent on government policy. They retain a certain measure of independence through their connections with civil society, writing commissioned histories, working in history-based institutions such as museums and heritage sites, teaching in schools and universities, working as film-makers and broadcasters, and so on. All these bear the influence of government policy, but none are entirely defined by it. The growth in the popularity of history in the public sphere, outside schools, has been steady since the 1960s, seemingly little influenced by changes in government and government policies or even by the state of school history. Universities provide a measure of autonomy, too, though dependence on research grants can make historians nervous and anxious to please new orthodoxies. I think we have to all value whatever independence we have, and find new opportunities wherever they may be.

Still, it's worth keeping an eye on government policy, and pressing for what we believe to be right. Governments do make a difference. For example, the course in Applied History which I helped establish in the late 1980s at UTS was very much helped by a grant from the Bicentennial Foundation, which enabled us to employ Chris Healy to work with us full time in developing our new courses. Without that funding, as time-poor

academics we would have found it very difficult indeed to develop something so new. So governments do matter.

My main critique of Howard government policy is that it sees history in national terms only, and is directing funds to those aspects of history that express a very particular, narrow, and conservative national vision. It is a history which values military intervention, even when it may not have been justified, which emphasises sport and European foundations of the nation, which stresses achievements rather than difficulties and problems which have helped make us what we are. It has little time for social history, for women's history, for environmental history, or for Indigenous history when it actually has implications for action in the present.

Yet history operates at many levels, local, regional, national, and transnational. When we talk of individual stories, these are meaningful not only as part of a national story but also as part of many other stories, those to do with worldwide phenomena such as religion, or women's rights, or engagement with a local environment, or whatever. History seen in purely national terms can become boring and restrictive; one of the achievements of professional historians is to place their histories in a variety of contexts according to the audience, to be able to convey micro histories as skillfully as macro ones, to be able to tell small detailed stories as well as giving a sense of the big picture, the large sweep. None of this is to deny the nation; it's an important part of life and its history needs to be known and understood, but it is to put it in some kind of perspective.

History has very often been the handmaiden of the nation state, organising its knowledge in national terms, and very often explicitly setting out to serve the interests of the nation, however conceptualised. We need to be aware of our own history and traditions in this respect, and to be careful about being drawn into the undeniable blandishments of national history. It is tempting to be told one is valuable for the nation, and to see one's work as having national value. Let's stand back a little, and look at other entities outside the nation, at the local and the transnational, the public and the private. Let's keep a fearless critical edge when that seems appropriate, and be wary of the excesses into which a discourse of national cohesion can draw us. A more cosmopolitan approach, interested in the intersections of peoples, in what they share and how they differ, in the marginal as well as the mainstream, the quirky alongside the obvious, will help keep us honest, and interesting.

¹ John Howard, 'The Liberal Tradition: The Beliefs and Values which Guide the Federal Government', Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, 18 November 1996, formerly available at <http://www.nla.gov.au/pmc/pressrel/menzies.html>

² Transcript of the Prime Minister the Hon John HJoward MP, Address to the National Press Club, Great Hall, Parliament House, 25 January 2006, available on the Prime Minister's website under 'Speeches'.

³ Mark McKenna, "Different Perspectives on Black Armband History", Research Paper 5 1997-8, Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Library. Available on the web at www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/1997-98/98rp05.htm; Sean Brawley, "A Comfortable and Relaxed Past': John Howard and the 'Battle of History': The First Phase – February 1992 to March 1996", *The Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History*, 1997, <http://www.jcu.edu.au/aff/history/articles/brawley.htm>.

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- ⁴ Manning Clark, "The Beginning of Wisdom", *Time Australia*, 25 January 1988, p. 12, as quoted in McKenna, *op.cit.*
- ⁵ McKenna, *op.cit.*
- ⁶ Brawley, *op.cit.*
- ⁷ John Howard, "Mr Keating's Mirage on the Hill: How the Republic, Like the Cheshire Cat, Came and Went", *Proceedings of the Third Conference of the Samuel Griffith Society, Fremantle, 5-6 November 1993*, Samuel Griffith Society, Melbourne, 1994, p. 115, as quoted in Brawley, *op.cit.*
- ⁸ Brawley, *op.cit.*
- ⁹ "PM's history speech gets mixed reception", *ABC News Online*, Thursday January 26, 2006, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200601/s1555858.htm>
- ¹⁰ "Julie Bishop: Our classrooms need to make a date with the facts", *The Australian* 6 July 2006, <http://theaustralian.com.au>
- ¹¹ "Carr tops list for history summit", *The Australian*, 13 July 2006, <http://theaustralian.com.au>
- ¹² "Beazley against history revival", *The Australian*, 6 July 2006, <http://theaustralian.com.au>
- ¹³ Tony Taylor, *The Future of the Past: Executive Summary of the Report of the National Inquiry into School History*, Department of Education, Science, and Training, Australian Government, May 2000. Available on the web at dest.gov.au.
- ¹⁴ Cited in Anna Clark, "History's Forgotten Voices", *The Age*, 15 July 2006, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/historys-forgotten-voices/2006/07/14/1152637869766.html>
- ¹⁵ Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Allen and Unwin, 2000, p. 178.
- ¹⁶ Davison, *op.cit.*, p. 195.
- ¹⁷ Muecke, Stephen, 'No Guilt with Black Armband', *The Financial Review*, 11 April 1997.
- ¹⁸ Marilyn Lake, "The Militarization of Australian History", unpublished speech delivered to NSW History Teachers' Association, April 2006. Many thanks for permission to use and cite this paper.
- ¹⁹ Lake, *op.cit.*
- ²⁰ Deb Wilkinson and Andrew Macintosh, "Playing Politics with the Federal Heritage Regime", Australia Institute Webpaper, August 2005, http://www.tai.org.au/Publications_Files/Papers&Sub_Files/NHL%20webpaper%20_Final_.pdf