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## The Politics of Australian History Education: An Initial Exploration

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*Over recent years in Australia there has been heated public debate over the past. Revisionist approaches registered a general and increasingly critical reconceptualisation of Australian history, but were met with significant conservative disapproval. This debate over national origins has ranged widely, and has been played out in various sites of Australian history: in the courts over Native Title and forced child removal, in the media and in politics. School history has also become a vital arena for discussion.*

*The desire to define the national past is inextricably linked with an intense political struggle for control; schoolchildren have been centrally cast as vital but vulnerable receptors of the national past. This paper analyses the increasing public intervention into history teaching as a political strategy. History syllabuses that attract no public comment are rare. In fact they have become inseparable from larger, more prominent debates over Australia's past.*

**Keywords:** *Australian history, History teaching, 'History Wars'*

On January 26 1988, Australia 'celebrated' 200 years of colonisation. Some commemorated 200 years of survival since white invasion. It was an event where readings of the past converged - how to represent that past in schools became a significant site of contention. During the year the federal Labor government called for a meeting of state and federal education ministers to reconsider school curricula, acknowledging Indigenous perspectives. Clyde Holding, the acting Federal Minister for Education and the former Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, explained the government's decision as a response to the fact that 'the average Australian [he said] has very little knowledge of the history of his [sic] country, and in particular the history of our indigenous people and their treatment.'<sup>1</sup> The attempt to acknowledge a history that was in many respects being played out on the margins in 1988 came amid growing public concern over possible Indigenous and non-Indigenous protest during the 'Celebration of a Nation'. Teacher unions had threatened to ban school Bicentennial programmes that did not encompass Aboriginal perspectives. And in New South Wales, the Education Department responded by permitting Aboriginal teachers and students to boycott some Bicentennial activities.

Such moves attracted significant criticism. The Federal Opposition Leader, John Howard, said that Aboriginal people had a right to lawful and peaceful dissent, but hoped they would exercise this right prudently. He said present white Australians were not responsible for the oppression of Aborigines in the past and accused the federal Government of downgrading the Bicentenary.<sup>2</sup> Considerable unease developed over how Bicentennial Australia ought to be depicted. Concern over school History was part of the vexatious issue of whether Australian history should be celebrated at all. Conservative journals such as *Quadrant* (a literary monthly) and the *IPA Review* (funded by business interests) ran protracted campaigns against what they saw as overly biased (and therefore unhistorical) readings of the past. In 1985, Ken Baker, editor of the *IPA Review*, had criticised the negative momentum associated with the impending Bicentenary. 'The Bicentenary's function should be to remind us of the achievements of the past 200 years,' he considered,

'of our debt to our forebears, and our obligations to future generations.'<sup>3</sup> Prominent mining executive and publicist, Hugh Morgan, produced a strong rejection of revisionist history, describing it as 'guilt speak'. Maintaining that the emphasis on Aboriginal dispossession and dispersion disrupted the national interest, Morgan described this 'Guilt Industry' as 'a campaign which has been designed above all to delegitimise the settlement of this country.'<sup>4</sup> The educationist Geoffrey Partington warned that teaching an overly negative history endangered 'our children':

[the] crude politicisation of Australian education, unscholarly dismissals of the mainline experience of the Australian people during the last two centuries, and the ruthless indoctrination of Australia's children in the name of neo-marxist versions of social justice, dominate discussion about history teaching as Australia approaches its bicentenary.<sup>5</sup>

### Historiography

The Bicentennial discord over the past was one of the first, and certainly the most prominent, public demonstrations of increasing historical tension and controversy. While critical Australian histories had long provoked significant conservative disapproval,<sup>6</sup> it was historian Geoffrey Blainey who in 1993 introduced a vivid mark of bereavement to illustrate the apparent emotional darkness of this writing.<sup>7</sup> Such history was 'Black Armband', he said. It reacted against the Australian achievement with a dark mourning of the nation. Revisionist interpretations challenged quite fundamentally public and peaceful narratives of Australian colonisation and nation-building. But they have been rejected by historians such as Blainey, John Hirst and now *Quadrant* editor, Patrick O'Farrell, as well as figures such as John Howard, for their political one-sidedness and for judging the past with the values of the present. The so-called 'Black Armband' history contains a bleak bias, these critics maintain; by failing to duly acknowledge the aspects of our past of which we should be proud, it misrepresents 'our history'. The articulation of

this debate has reinforced the widespread perception of historical opposition, where readings of Australian history are divided along lines of black and white.

In this sense, debates about history education have quite obviously paralleled wider historiographical discussions. Anxiety over syllabus content has repeated this separation of approaches to Australian history. As we shall see, the language of 'political correctness', of 'black armbands' and 'white blindfolds', of the 'Guilt Industry', 'Multicultural Industry' or 'Aboriginal Industry' is replayed in the contest over 'invasion' and 'settlement' to describe European colonisation in history textbooks. Yet the debate is also implicitly pedagogical. This is not simply a contest over the nation, but a politicisation of the past invoking the next generation. It is, moreover, a collective invocation, where 'our history' and 'our children' are presented as a unifying national ideal.

### **'Our History, Our children'**

After the Bicentenary new History syllabuses attracted increasing criticism from conservative commentators, especially, who rejected much of their content for continuing to be too negative, and misrepresenting 'our' history. In 1994 the columnist Paddy McGuinness, in a characteristic serve, determined that the New South Wales Junior History Syllabus had been hijacked by the 'new establishment'<sup>8</sup> — a vague collective noun used to describe a dominant, 'politically correct' orthodoxy, which had contaminated intellectual and cultural circles in Australia, and was now in danger of infecting schools. According to McGuinness the 1991 Mandatory Australian History strand had been full of 'politically correct buzzwords' such as 'invasion', 'genocide', 'assimilation', 'integration', 'resistance', 'culture conflict', 'dispossession', 'racism', 'discrimination', 'Aboriginality', 'paternalism', 'terra nullius', 'civil rights', 'land degradation' and 'self-determination'. 'This is not about understanding the past in order not to repeat it,' McGuinness warned, 'but about controlling the future through indoctrinating our children.'<sup>9</sup>

Four years later, he was just as alarmed:

The notion that Australian history should be taught, to little children and in schools and colleges, as the history of an invasion is the product of a political propagandistic version of history. Our history does not belong to an undistinguished syllabus committee of pedants but to the community as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

McGuinness is a notorious stirrer and must be read with caution. Certainly his strategy is alarmist and populist, and his use of 'our history', and even 'little children' needs to read in that context. Yet he is not the only commentator who has used these terms; as it has progressed, in fact, the debate has become precisely an historical controversy over 'our history'. Everyone, from all sides of politics it seems, identifies with, belongs to, and has an investment in the teaching of Australian history in schools. Trying to pin down one element of the broader discussion, this paper essentially analyses a conservative strategy; with their imaginary collective past lies the paradox of this debate. While Australian history is explicitly divided (good/bad, black/white truth/untruth etc.), claims reverberate in newspaper columns, houses of parliament and public fora around the country of the need for 'our children' to learn 'our history'.

### **Invasion**

In 1994 a new Queensland year five Social Studies sourcebook in a state-wide trial was 'exposed' by the Brisbane daily, the *Courier-Mail*, for suggesting that 'explorer', 'pioneer' and 'discover' are value-laden terms.<sup>11</sup> The sourcebook had been introduced to replace an earlier text, removed in 1992 because it was deemed racist and discriminatory by the Education Department. An information sheet in the sourcebook, which was sent to all schools, outlined the views presented by the Department's draft support material:

Terms such as **discovery**, **pioneers** or **exploration** should be used in their historical context. With approximately 40000 years of **occupation** of Australia, **Indigenous** people had already discovered, explored and named all parts of the continent. Various parts were re-named by **European explorers**. [...]

Many **Aborigines** and **Torres Strait Islanders** interpret the **arrival** of the First Fleet and the subsequent spread of **European settlements** as an **invasion**. Many **non-Indigenous** people, including a considerable number of historians, agree with the application of the term 'invasion' to some of the events which have taken place since the **transportation** of **convicts** and the establishment of the **penal colony** in 1788. Others argue that the terms **colonisation**, **non-Indigenous occupation** or **settlement** accurately describe the same events and actions.<sup>12</sup>

The State Opposition Leader, Rob Borbidge, said the book was a disgrace: 'This is just the tip of the iceberg of the effort to make our entire education system politically correct and many stupidities will have to be weeded out.'<sup>13</sup>

Responses from the Labor Premier, Wayne Goss, contradicted his own Education Department. The attempts to replace 'inaccurate and misleading'<sup>14</sup> representations of Indigenous people by the Department were rejected by Goss, who argued that terms like 'invasion' went too far. There was a need to present Australian history honestly and fairly, he said, but 'this does not mean that we need to reinvent the language'.<sup>15</sup> 'I think just about all Australians would not regard what happened in 1788 as an invasion', he added. 'There is a world of difference between the arrival of the First Fleet and what most people understand as an invasion.'<sup>16</sup>

Goss was obviously under public pressure to distance himself from the rewrite his government had commissioned. The vast majority of correspondence to the *Courier-Mail* displayed disbelief

and anger that European colonisation could be construed as anything but 'settlement'; 'invasion' was simply an unhelpful term of political-correctness. Geoff Temby from Hamilton wrote in and complained of double standards:

What about the British people who were forcibly transported here in chains, and their descendents? Are they invaders? And what about the Europeans and Asians who have been encouraged and financially sponsored by governments to migrate here? Are they invaders?<sup>17</sup>

Another correspondent, Barry G. Shield, maintained that the reluctance to use terms from a proud pioneering history was misplaced and ill-founded. 'That Mitchell, Leichhardt, Stuart, Oxley etc were going where countless other feet had trod does not detract from the fact that, as far as the Europeans were concerned, they were exploring new territory, and were thus "pioneers".'<sup>18</sup>

When the debate flared again six years later after the release of a new syllabus, correspondents were equally dismayed:

To omit people such as Captain Cook, Robert Menzies and many others from the teaching of history is ludicrous. We are trying to instil national pride and feelings of self-worth in our youth but are denying them the most important part of their heritage. The settlement of Australia was not an invasion but an extension of man's eternal quest for expansion. This is part of our history and should be taught to all, without political or religious bias.<sup>19</sup>

There were a few letters supporting the new curriculum document. Most were from teachers.<sup>20</sup> Generally, however, the editorial and letters pages of the paper were dominated by the anti-invasion faction:

History is best when viewed from every available perspective. This requires judgement, and a high level of

general knowledge of events and policies then current. It is not a discipline well served by populist simplicity.<sup>21</sup>

If anyone knew about populist simplicity it would have to be the *Courier-Mail*. During the subsequent debate, there were a number of letters we have access to that were sent to the paper in support of the Queensland School Curriculum Council, but were never published.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that behind the collective ideal of 'Australia's story' initiated by conservative critics was a crude insistence on a polarised approach to the past. The apparently unifying notions of 'our children' and 'our history' were, and remain, underpinned by simplistic and ultimately divisive understandings of historical interpretation.

There were similar experiences in other states. The Liberal Minister for Education in New South Wales, Virginia Chadwick, was condemned at the 1994 National Party State Conference for allowing the word 'invasion' to be included in the new primary social studies syllabus in place of 'settlement'.<sup>22</sup> A delegate who initiated the motion said there was no need to change the way that Australian children had been learning for two hundred years: 'The wording as is — settlement instead of invasion — portrays the idea white man came into Australia and settled without the idea of invading the country.'<sup>23</sup>

The draft was consequently toned down. 'Invasion' was removed from some sections of the syllabus and replaced by more neutral terms, such as 'arrival of British people' and 'before 1788'.<sup>24</sup> In response, the New South Wales Teachers' Federation threatened to ban the syllabus. Then in Opposition, John Howard accused the Federation of attempting to distort the past to make a 'contemporary political point'. Its members were guilty of 'ideologically driven intellectual thuggery'.<sup>25</sup> 'The description "invasion"', he later maintained, 'should never have been in the syllabus in the first place.'<sup>26</sup> The word 'invasion' challenged the legitimacy of Australia's foundation. Recognition of that illegitimacy in History syllabuses extended the concern about changing approaches to



Australian history into the realm of public education. Speaking with the populist talkback radio host John Laws after his election in 1996, Howard denounced the 'Black Armband' curriculum. 'To tell children whose parents were not part of that treatment,' he maintained, 'to tell children who themselves have been no part of it, that we're all part of it, that we're part of a sort of racist and bigoted history is something that Australians reject'.<sup>27</sup>

In Victoria, the shift in syllabus emphasis was perhaps more astonishing for its transparency. In the unit of Koori History in the 1991 senior *History Study Design*, for example, the syllabus suggested that 'In order to retain control of their unique cultural identity, Koori people have responded in a variety of ways to continuous pressures to disperse and assimilate since the European invasion.'<sup>28</sup> By 1996, the text was the same but for the last two words: 'In order to retain control of their unique cultural identity, Koori people have responded in a variety of ways to continuous pressures to disperse and assimilate since **the British settlement**'.<sup>29</sup>

It is no coincidence that the syllabus overhaul began directly after a state election and change of government. (When the Liberal-conservative government under the autocratic Jeff Kennett was elected.) Emphasising concepts of 'power', 'race', 'gender', 'class' and 'ideology', the rewrite also coincided with increasing conservative concern that the VCE curriculum was politically biased.<sup>30</sup> By the 1996 syllabus, however, the aim to develop an understanding of 'those concepts [of race, class, gender etc] related to the field of history' had been well and truly abandoned.<sup>31</sup>

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Australian history is loaded with the sense of diametric opposition that now dominates approaches to the past. History is being read in black and white, and such bipolarity is replayed in contest over school syllabuses around the nation. Conservative criticism of history syllabuses has utilised a form of 'wedge politics', where in the name of 'Australia's story', readings of the past are set in

opposition. 'Our history' and 'our children' are of course posited against an imaginary other, or 'them'. It is, no less, part of a wider political strategy to capitalise on anxiety about Australian history. The frame of 'our history' may be reiterated in any number of contexts: Native Title, the stolen generations, even refugees. But it is one that ultimately rests on an illogic of unity through division.

## NOTES

1. Steve Burrell et al, 'Govt Bid to Head of Black Protests', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 January 1988, p. 1.
2. Burrell, 'Govt Bid to Head of Black Protests', p. 1.
3. Ken Baker, 'The Bicentenary: Celebration or Apology', *IPA Review*, (1985), pp. 175-6.
4. Hugh Morgan, 'The Guilt Industry', *IPA Review*, (1988), p. 17.
5. Geoffrey Partington, 'Education for Citizenship in Bicentennial Australia,' *Quadrant*, August 1988, p. 32.
6. See for instance: Ken Baker, 'The Bicentenary: celebration or apology?' *IPA Review*, Summer 1985. pp. 175-82; Leonie Kramer, 'The rocky horror history of Australia', *IPA Review*, Summer 1985, pp. 183-5; John Hirst, 'The blackening of our past', *IPA Review*, December-February 1988/89, pp. 49-54; Hugh Morgan, 'The guilt industry', *IPA Review*, May-July 1988, pp 17-20.
7. Blainey, 'Drawing up a balance sheet of our history', *Quadrant*, July-August 1993, pp. 10-15.
8. Padraic McGuinness, 'History of Invasion Ignores More Balanced School of Thought,' *Australian*, 15 June 1994.
9. Padraic McGuinness, 'Big Brother Writes the Syllabus', *Weekend Australian*, 17-18 August 1991, p. 2.

10. Padraic McGuinness, 'History of Invasion Ignores More Balanced School of Thought', *Australian*, 15 June 1994, p. 15.
11. Melissa Ketchell, 'Explorers Axed in 'Correct' Syllabus', *Courier-Mail*, 7 February 1994, p. 1.
12. cit. Ray Land, "'Furore over Invasion Text": Introduction to the Politics Process and Players' in *Invasion and After: A Case Study in Curriculum Politics*, ed. Ray Land (Griffith University: Queensland Studies Centre, 1994), p. 7. Original emphasis.
13. Tony Koch, 'Furore over "Invasion" Text: Govt Refuses to Intervene', *Courier-Mail*, 8 February 1994, p. 3.
14. Land, 'Furore over Invasion Text', p. 1.
15. Tony Koch, 'Goss Cans "Invasion" Textbook', *Courier-Mail*, 9 February 1994, p. 3.
16. Julie Lewis, 'Goss Repels "Invaders"', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February 1994.
17. Geoff Temby, 'Letter: More Invaders?', *Courier-Mail*, 11 February 1994, p. 8.
18. Barry G. Shield, 'Letter', *Courier-Mail*, 15 February 1994, p. 8.
19. Ted Wilson, 'Letter', *Courier-Mail*, 13 June 2000, p. 14.
20. See, for example, Glenda McGregor, 'Letter', *Courier-Mail*, 13 June 2000: 'It was with some bemusement that I discovered that, as a teacher of social science, I was about to become a Maoist revolutionary.'
21. Editorial, 'Our History: It Needs to Be Fully Understood', *Courier-Mail*, 10 February 1994, p. 8.
22. Some of these letters have been reproduced on the Queensland School Curriculum Council website:  
<http://www.qscc.qld.edu.au/kla/sose/faq.html#updates>,

accessed 15 January 2002.

23. 'Nats Condemn Minister's "Distortion" of History', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June 1994.
24. Michael Wilkins, 'Nationals Condemn Chadwick "Invasion"', *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 June 1994.
25. Julie Lewis, 'Teachers Threaten Syllabus Ban', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 June 1994, p. 9. See also Alan Barcan, 'History in Decay', *Quadrant*, July-August 1999, pp. 45-55. Analysing the language of History syllabuses, such as the use of 'invasion', provides a valuable insight into how history teaching is defined in terms of wider social discussions like the Black Armband debate: *History Stages 4-5 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW, 1998).  
*History Syllabus Years 7-10* (Board of Studies NSW, 1992).  
*Modern History Stage 6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW, 1999).  
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26. Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History* (Ringwood: Viking, 1998), p. 160.
27. Editorial, 'An Invasion Indeed,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 June 1995, p. 14.
28. cit. Judith Brett, *The Age*, 8 November 1996, p. A15.
29. *History Study Design* (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1991), p. 75. (My emphasis.)
30. *History Study Design* (Board of Studies Victoria, 1996). (My emphasis.)
31. Interview with Kevin Donnelly, 20 May 2002. Notes in possession of author. *History Study Design* (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 1991), p. 2.
32. *History Study Design* (Board of Studies Victoria, 1996), p. 6.