Politicians Using History:

Six months after coming to office in 1996, Prime Minister John Howard gave the annual Sir Robert Menzies Lecture. He used the occasion to call for a public reappraisal of the Liberal Party's legacy and to reclaim Australian history from its "political opponents". Howard argued that Labor's revisionist perspective unfairly dismissed the proud heritage of the Liberal Party and it insinuated "Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination". "I take a very different view", he countered. "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."[1]

Politicians use history in many ways. They make history, as actors; they often write history, as diarists and in memoirs; some even read and study history, and their claims to scholarly expertise on the subject give a degree of intellectual authority and respect. Politicians use the past to demonstrate their own historical significance and their fidelity to national traditions. Yet this clawing back of Australian history by Howard was more than big-noting or dilettantish engagement. Here was a politician *doing* history, remaking what he saw as a narrative betrayed.

Other papers in this collection trace a trajectory of change in political history. In particular, they examine the challenges that new social movements as well as postmodern and postcolonial theory have presented for the discipline since the 1960s. While these new readings and approaches profoundly influenced the way political history is practised by historians, this paper examines how history is practised in Australian politics itself—and it notices an increasingly strategic use of the past by politicians in recent years.

Political opportunism is nothing new, and the political potency of national history has been understood for generations: nation-states, and their concomitant threads of nationalism, require

---

[1] John Howard, "The Liberal Tradition: The Beliefs and Values Which Guide the Federal Government", 1996 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, 18 November 1996 (available from: http://menzieslecture.org/1996.html; accessed 4 March 2009).

coherent narratives for citizens to *imagine* their shared identity.[2] But there has been an unquestionable surge in history's political influence over the last twenty or thirty years—as the various "history wars" that have broken out around the world attest.[3] Australia has been no exception. Disputes over its national memorials, museums, history syllabuses and texts continue to generate considerable controversy in the media, in public debate and in politics itself. Yet it raises a vital question: how has this politicisation of the past affected Australian political history in the present? Prevailing narratives of Australian history swing significantly according to government elections (both state and federal), and the use of history has undoubtedly become an effective political strategy in Australia. But where does this leave the discipline itself? Because the debate continues to frame Australian political history as partisan and polarised, the role of historians and the place of historical complexity in such discussions have become increasingly problematic.

I. Politicians and the past

John Howard's Menzies Lecture was hardly the first time an Australian politician has ventured into the realm of history, but it was remarkable for its political acuity. Politicians' memoirs and collected speeches have been popular and often vivid accounts of the past, and they are valuable contributions to political history. Rather than employing history for political traction and power in office, however, they tend to conform to a conventional, retrospective historical narrative. While Gough Whitlam's account of the 1975 Dismissal and Robert Menzies' *The Measure of the Years* come from very different political perspectives, as history they have much in common.[4] Politicians' collected speeches, broadcasts and essays are similar historical sources for the ways they contribute to the

---

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2nd ed.) (London, New York, 1991).

[3] See, for example: Robert Phillips, *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State: A Study in Educational Politics* (London, 1998); Linda Symcox, *Whose History?: The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms* (New York, 2002); J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto, 1998); James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York, 1991); Josef Joffe, "The Battle of the Historians", *Encounter*, Vol. 69, 1 (1987), pp. 72-77; Robert, Manne (ed.), *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Melbourne, 2003).

[4] Gough Whitlam, *The Truth of the Matter*, 3rd ed. (Carlton, Vic., 2005); Robert Menzies, *The Measure of the Years* (London, 1970).

discipline, as well as our understanding of the context and motivations of these influential political actors.[5] These are the artefacts, if you like, of politicians' place in political history.

Even politicians' utilisation of the past left Australian political history relatively untroubled until recently. Pledges to Australia's British heritage and tradition in the 1940s and 50s called upon the past to iterate the "Australian story" to its people. But as James Curran suggests, this was an orthodox and widely accepted national narrative.[6] In his Australia Day address in 1942, for example, Labor Prime Minister John Curtin emphasised the cultural and political heritage Australians garnered from Britain: "We carry on the purpose of Captain James Cook; we maintain the tradition of Arthur Phillip. This is Australia for Australians."[7] Writing in the London *Times* newspaper in 1956, Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies also gladly located British influence at the heart of Australia's past and present: "The Crown was and, I am happy to say, is an essential ingredient in Australian Government and life."[8] Changes in government then did not seem to dramatically affect this national story. Even as Australia's "Britishness" was challenged in the 1940s and 1950s by shifting foreign allegiances and a growing radical Australian nationalism, the Australian story remained quite British. Despite figuring prominently in the nationalist revival, Russel Ward's iconic book *The Australian Legend* suggested that "it has become more and more clear to everyone that Australian patriotism does not usually or necessarily involve weakening of attachment to Britain, but rather the reverse".[9]

---

[5] See, for example: Robert Menzies, *Speech is of Time: Selected Speeches and Writings* (London, 1958); J.B. Chifley, *Things Worth Fighting For: Speeches* (Carlton, Vic., 1952); Malcolm Fraser, *Common Ground: Issues that Should Bind and Not Divide Us* (Camberwell, Vic., 2003).

[6] James Curran, *The Power of Speech: Australian Prime Ministers Defining the National Image* (Melbourne, 2004), p. 4.

[7] Cited in Curran, *The Power of Speech*, p. 32.

[8] Robert Menzies, "The ever changing Commonwealth" (available from:
http://www.menziesvirtualmuseum.org.au/transcripts/Speech_is_of_Time/102_EverChangingCwlth.html;
accessed 11 March 2009).

[9] Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (London 1970 [1958]), p. 56. See also: Carl Bridge, "Anglo-Australian Attitudes: Remembering and Re-reading Russel Ward", *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol. 10, 2, 2008, pp. 196-199; Neville Meaney, "Britishness and Australian Identity", *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 32, 116, 2001, pp. 76-90; and Curran, *The Power of Speech*, pp. 26-27, who notes that despite Australia's diplomatic shift towards the US following Fall of Singapore in 1942, the political discourse offered by Australian politicians was still British in substance.

Yet change was in the air. After Menzies' departure, his Liberal successor Harold Hold presided over the initial dismantling of the White Australia Policy, as well as a rapidly shifting social climate, and the national sentiment was beginning to look very different indeed. While Australia's history continued to stir national politics, the narratives invoked by politicians were changing significantly. By 1972, when Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam stated that "It's time we had our own symbols of our own nationhood", he was undoubtedly responding to a new and emerging sense of Australian history.[10]

So in one sense, contemporary use of the past by politicians has a traceable political lineage. Calling on this "Australian story" gives political narratives coherence and meaning as politicians align their parties with the trajectory of the nation itself. Yet there has been an unmistakeable shift in their utilisation of the nation's past: the political force of historical debate has intensified in recent decades, and the potency of this national narrative has become increasingly apparent. Politicians such as Menzies, Curtin and Chifley drew on images of Britishness to foster a British Australian nationalism. Even a growing radical national narrative that lauded the country's egalitarian heroism celebrated a story of white Australian progress. But it was not until this narrative was fundamentally challenged by a new generation of political historians and activists that Australian history gained increasingly contested prominence. Their challenge generated not only radical historical disagreement, but a corresponding *political* debate.

This was not simply a new genre of Australian political history, but a history that had became inherently political. As other papers in this collection have catalogued, the collapse of the White Australia Policy from the 1960s, along with multicultural domestic policies, the rise of the women's movement, and a growing campaign for Aboriginal land rights fundamentally questioned the conventional story of Australia's pioneering heritage. Traditional narratives were overturned, and a new wave of historians campaigned to include Indigenous, migrant and feminist perspectives. These revisionist interpretations were highly critical of Australia's "heroic achievement", to return to Howard's phrase, and they asserted that the nation's iconic heroes had instead exploited the land,

---

[10] Curran, *The Power of Speech*, p. 79.

misappropriated Indigenous owners, and excluded women from positions of power and from history itself.[11]

Yet this reactive challenge to Australian political history generated significant a reaction of its own. A number of historians and public commentators subsequently countered the revisionist assessment of Australian history as overly bleak and politically biased—and a profound historiographical debate over Australia's past was born.[12] Different interpretations of political history were contested in books and articles, as well as over school syllabuses and university curricula.[13] Even beyond the academy, these concerns generated considerable discussion and debate.

This historiographical dispute was infused with politics: for those advocating the revisionist approach, new history writing represented a profound political challenge to the traditional exclusion of alternative historical perspectives in Australia; for those defenders of the Australian "achievement", moreover, the politics of revision was moralistic, partisan and radical. Nevertheless, it was in the broadening of these debates into the public sphere that the politicisation of Australian political history became much more explicit.

History is 'good politics'

Recent theorisations of historical disagreement have invoked the "politics of memory" as a significant concept to understand the mounting political contest over national narratives. Such an

---

[11] This field of this critical new history is immense: Humphrey McQueen's *A New Britannia* (Ringwood, 1970) noted a pervasive racism and individualism within the Australian ethos. Books such as Anne Summers' *Damned Whores and Gods Police* (Ringwood, 1975) and Miriam Dixson's *The Real Matilda* (Ringwood, 1976) questioned and exposed the dominant myths about masculine, white Australian heroes. W.E.H. Stanner's 1968 Boyer Lectures, *After the Dreaming* (Sydney, 1968), challenged the exclusion of Indigenous perspectives from Australian history. Aboriginal autobiographies such as Marnie Kennedy's *Born a Half-Caste* (Canberra, 1985) and Margaret Tucker's *If Everyone Cared* (Sydney, 1977) are also invaluable sources. For a thorough account of Aboriginal historiography, see: Lorenzo Veracini, "A Prehistory of Australia's History Wars: The Evolution of Aboriginal History During the 1970s and 1980s", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 52, 3 (2006), pp. 439-54.

[12] Again, this is but a brief selection: John Hirst, "The Blackening of Our Past", *IPA Review*, vol. 42, 3 (1988/89), pp. 49-54; Hugh Morgan, "The Guilt Industry", *IPA Review*, vol. 42, 1 (1988), p. 17.

[13] Alan Barcan, "The Aims of History in the Secondary School", *Agora*, Vol. 10, 5 (1976): 6-15; Alan Barcan, "History in Decay", *Quadrant*, Vol. 43, 7-8 (1999): 45-55; Ian Gray, "Method: The History of What?" *Agora*, Vol. 17, 5 (1983): M15.

idea shows how national stories have become so politically fraught in Australia and elsewhere.[14] It also hints at the difficulty of scholarly analysis of these debates: by outlining the political tensions of historical disputes, do we not risk perpetuating their simple lines of division? Somewhat paradoxically, just as political history broadened to accommodate multiple perspectives and eschew traditional teleology, contests over that past have come to represent a narrow understanding of the history discipline. In other words, while research in political history became more postmodern and inclusive, the politicised historical debates such scholarship motivated demanded a simplistic "choice" between competing national narratives.

This challenge to history, triggered by the growing implausibility of any unifying national narrative, was made clear in the lead-up to the Bicentenary in 1988. Contrasting national stories jostled uncomfortably alongside one another and reinforced the perception that Australians had to choose somehow between distinct versions of the past. Such views fractured along party lines—even the Bicentennial slogan was changed three times by two different governments as each attempted to define this historic occasion to the public.[15]

The historiographical debate among historians and public commentators continued apace in scholarly journals and broad-based periodicals, but it was the media and public interest in this increasingly polarised national narrative that strengthened political investment in it. State and federal politicians were compelled to comment on the Bicentenary and what it meant for their constituents, but in so doing faced significant political opposition. Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke was loudly criticised for publicly declaring that "All of us have a guilt and a responsibility for many of the injustices that occurred in those two hundred years".[16] Meanwhile, the New South Wales State

---

[14] Dominique Schnapper, "Memory in Politics", *Partisan Review*, vol. 67, 3 (2000), p. 427; Paula Hamilton, "Sale of the Century? Memory and Historical Consciousness in Australia", in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, eds Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London, 2003), pp. 136-7; Patrick Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History", *The History Teacher (UK)*, Vol. 33, 4 (2000), pp. 533-48.

[15] Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Carlton, 2003), pp. 95-100; Lyn Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration: Creating National Identities in the United States and Australia* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 97. See also Michael Gordon, "Bruised, baffled but unbowed", *Weekend Australian*, 2-3 November 1996, p. 21, where John Howard acknowledged that "Living Together's a nice idea, but for a Bicentenary I would have thought that the Australian Achievement was a little more direct".

[16] Hugh Morgan, "The Guilt Industry", *IPA Review*, Vol. 42, 1 (1988), p. 18.

Labor Government also came under fire from conservative politicians for allowing Aboriginal students and teachers to boycott official Bicentennial activities.[17] As the debate wore on, additional sites of contest reinforced the growing political relationship with Australia's past.

By the 1990s, the political influence on this historical dispute had intensified considerably. The debate was particularly vivid between Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating and John Howard, his conservative successor. Keating was a self-styled "visionary", who pushed for increasing engagement with the Asia-Pacific region, the transition to an Australian republic, and the pursuit of reconciliation with Indigenous people. He contrasted this "Big Picture" vision with the perceived narrowness of what he saw in conservative Australian politics.[18]

Keating was intent on an aggressive and calculated historical engagement. In his 1993 H.V. Evatt Lecture, Keating aligned Labor's progressive narrative with the nation's: "we have always been the change-makers and the true believers in Australia and Australians", he said. "Labor's story has always been very much Australia's story".[19] By arguing that the values and tradition of the Labor Party were one and the same with Australia's, Keating was essentially constructing a partisan national identity.

With some considerable pleasure, Keating also tactically dismissed the apparent old-world dream of conservative Australia. His national narrative, alluding to the imagery of historian Manning Clark, determined an ideological struggle between forward thinking "enlargers" like himself and restrictive "straighteners", which he notoriously cast the conservative Coalition.[20] In a famous attack on the Coalition's policy platform, *Fightback*, Keating lambasted the Opposition for harking back to

[17] Steve Burrell et al., "Govt bid to head of black protests", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 January 1988, p. 1.

[18] Curran, *The Power of Speech*, chapter 5; Martin Crotty and Andrew Bonnell "Australia's History under Howard, 1996-2007", *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 617 (2008), p. 151; and Don Watson, *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart: A Portrait of Paul Keating PM* (North Sydney, 2002), pp. 91-94, 205.

[19] Paul Keating, 'Starting the Process', H. V. Evatt Lecture, 28 April 1993, in *Advancing Australia: The Speeches of Paul Keating, Prime Minister*, ed. Mark Ryan (Sydney, 1995), p. 154.

[20] Curran, *The Power of Speech*, pp. 281-284; Mark McKenna, "Different Perspectives on Black Armband History", *Research Paper* 5, 1997-1998, Parliamentary Research Library (available from: http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/RP/1997-98/98rp05.htm; accessed 1 April 2009); Mark McKenna, "Metaphors of Light and Darkness: The Politics of 'Black Armband' History", *Melbourne Journal of Politics*, 25 (1998), pp. 67-84.

a past that simply did not reflect what he saw in contemporary Australia.[21] It was not just clever politicking that marked Keating's historical bent. There were also moments of moving solemnity, such as his 1992 Redfern Park speech to mark the International Year of the World's Indigenous people and his speech commemorating the Unknown Soldier in 1993.[22]

Yet such imagery infuriated conservatives like Howard. In the lead-up to the 1996 election, Howard gave a series of "Headland speeches" to the Coalition Party faithful outlining his vision for Australia. He claimed Keating had "engaged in an attempted heist of Australian identity",[23] and reclaimed Australian identity for the "possession of all Australians".[24] Simply pointing out Labor's historical bias, however, did not stop Howard from redefining that national story for his own political interests. In a talk to the Australian Liberal Students Foundation at the University of Sydney in 1996, he said "it is tremendously important that all of you understand that winning back of ideas, that winning back of history is tremendously important".[25]

Instead of Keating's vision, Howard astutely positioned himself as an Australian moderate, an everyman. "I'd like to be seen as an average Australian bloke", he said. "I can't think of a nobler description of anybody than to be called an average Australian bloke". He rejected Keating's Big Picture, and brought the historical debate back to Australian families, whom he said had unfairly been made to feel guilty about the nation's past: Australians need "to ensure that our history as a nation is not written definitively by those who take the view that Australians should apologise for most of it". And in a television interview a month before his election in March 1996, Howard said he

---

[21] Paul Keating in *Hansard: House of Representatives*, 27 February 1992, p. 373: "You can go back to the fifties to your nostalgia, your Menzies, the Caseys and the whole lot. They were not aggressively Australian, they were not aggressively proud of our culture, and we will have no bar of you or your sterile ideology."

[22] Paul Keating, "Redfern Park Speech", 10 December 1992 (available from: http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/ILB/2001/57.html; accessed 5 May 2008); Paul Keating, "One of Us", 11 November 1993, in *Advancing Australia: The Speeches of Paul Keating, Prime Minister*, ed. Mark Ryan (Sydney, 1995), p. 287-288.

[23] Cit. Carol Johnson, "John Howard's 'Value' and Australian Identity", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42, 2, 2007, p. 145.

[24] John Howard, "The Role of Government: A Modern Liberal Approach", The Menzies Research Centre 1995 National Lecture Series, Parliament House, Canberra, 1995 (available from: http://australianpolitics.com/executive/howard/pre-2002/95-06-06role-of-government.shtml; accessed 10 July 2009).

[25] Cited in Curran, *The Power of Speech*, p. 256.

wanted Australians to "feel comfortable and relaxed about three things: I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about their history; I would like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the present and I'd also like to see them comfortable and relaxed about the future".[26]

Howard the historian was every bit a battler as the constituents he was speaking to. And, like them, he believed in an Australian narrative that was for the most part optimistic and unproblematic. Here, Howard's tactics departed significantly from Keating's ambitious cosmopolitanism, for he promoted a determinedly populist brand of Australian history and identity.[27] The new prime minister's catch-cries of "the mainstream", "the battler", and their enemy, "the elites", were effective marketing grabs that mimicked and employed the power of the media headline to present a simple, uncomplicated and apparently unpartisan message about Australia and its past.[28]

Howard's appeal to the historical middle ground also alluded to historian Geoffrey Blainey's prominent 1993 article in *Quadrant* magazine, "Drawing Up a Balance Sheet of Our History", where he outlined the need for a moderate and affirming national past. Such "balance" was necessary, he said, because revisionist history writing was just as one-sided as the celebratory, traditional narratives it sought to overturn. According to Blainey, their "Black Armband" vision had come to dominate approaches to the past, and it presented a moralistic and unnecessarily mournful account of Australian history.[29]

Blainey's striking metaphors of the Black Armband and the Balance Sheet were eagerly adopted by Howard. In parliament, he stated unequivocally that Australian history should be more positive. "I profoundly reject ... what others have described, and I have adopted the description, as

[26] Liz Jackson, "An Average Australian Bloke", *Four Corners*, 19 February 1996 (available from: http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2004/s1212701.htm; accessed 26 March 2009).

[27] Nick Dyrenfurth, "John Howard's Hegemony of Values: The Politics of 'Mateship' in the Howard Decade", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42, 2, 2007, p. 219.

[28] See, for example: Rae Wear, "Permanent Populism: The Howard Government 1996-2007", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, 4, pp. 617-634; John Warhurst, "The Howard Decade in Australian Government and Politics", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42, 2, 2007, pp. 189-194. For an examination of the "headlinese" of the History Wars, see Jennifer Craik, "'Was This an Invasion?': Framing History in the Media", in *Invasion and After: A Case Study in Curriculum Politics*, ed. Ray Land (Griffith University, 1994), pp. 41-58.

[29] Geoffrey Blainey, "Drawing up a Balance Sheet of Our History", *Quadrant*, Vol. 37, 7-8 (1993), pp. 10-15.

the black armband view of Australian history", he said. And, like Blainey, Howard called for "balance": "I believe that the balance sheet of Australian history is a very generous and benign one. I believe that, like any other nation, we have black marks upon our history but amongst the nations of the world we have a remarkably positive history."[30]

This strategy effectively shifted the historical goal posts to the right. In casting themselves as balanced and moderate, conservatives could reject revisionist history as biased and extreme. This political tailoring of the past was by no means restricted to the right, for Keating himself had gleefully dismissed conservative Australian history as universally backward. But suggesting that Keating advocated an apologist view of the past carefully ignored the fact that he implored Australians not to feel "guilty" about it in his famous Redfern Park speech.[31]

The escalating debate confirmed the mounting force of history as an effective political strategy. It was not restricted to one side of politics by any means, and has been employed by state and federal politicians alike—but the political traction generated by using history does seem, superficially at least, to be confined to the Labor and Coalition Parties. (Perhaps claiming ownership of Australia's collective past is far less plausible for the minor parties, which appeal to sectional interests.) This political branding of Australian history in recent decades reveals a shift in the way the past is used by politicians. History has long been "good politics", enabling politicians to insert themselves in the narrative of the nation. But with their marketing approach to the past that utilises and mimics simple media headlines and grabs, politicians from both major parties have been increasingly able to project their factional brands of Australian history as national imperatives.

During his time in office, New South Wales Labor Premier Bob Carr established a Premier's History Prize, a state-wide "History Week" and mandated the study of Australian history in secondary schools in years 9 and 10. For Carr, a self-styled "history buff", this push towards the past was undoubtedly genuine. It was also electorally popular. Despite concern from teachers and historians that the mandatory subject was too content heavy and was intensely disliked by students,

---

[30] John Howard, *Weekly House Hansard*, October 29, 1996, p. 5976.
[31] See: Keating's "Redfern Park Speech", where he stated: "Guilt is not a very constructive emotion. I think what we need to do is open our hearts a bit."

it received widespread support from public commentators and voters anxious that children's lack of national knowledge threatened the future of the nation itself.[32]

Here, the Labor Premier developed an unlikely alliance with Howard over history teaching. Both tapped into a widespread public belief that history education should focus more on teaching a coherent national narrative and less on social themes and issues—those elements that new political histories had brought to the discipline. In 2006, the Howard government announced a national History Summit to develop a federally coordinated curriculum approach along the New South Wales model, and it continued to push for the implementation of this traditional political history in schools up until the 2007 election. Museums were another site where Howard thought the national story should not be compromised. In 2003, his government commissioned a much-publicised inquiry of the National Museum of Australia after accusing its exhibitions of presenting an overly negative and partial account of Australia's past. The investigation into the Museum found no systemic evidence of bias, but significant public damage had been done, and the Museum's Director, Dawn Casey, was not reappointed.[33]

These government interventions into school history and museums, as well as its insistence on a citizenship test for new migrants, represented a profound recasting of history from its growing disciplinary emphasis on complexity and critical thinking to serving the nation itself.[34] Despite

[32] Julie Lewis, "Carr calls for a return to educational basics, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 June 1994, p. 5; Kate Cameron and Jennifer Lawless, "Securing Their Future: Response from the History Teachers' Association of NSW", *Teaching History*, vol. 31, no. 3 (1997): 4-5; Nadia Jamal, "Changes to history course fail to reassure teachers", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September 1998, p. 8; Dennis Shanahan and Guy Healy, "PM's Timely History Lesson", *Australian*, 28 April 2000, p. 1; Christopher Pearson, "Let History Be the Judge", Australian, 22 July 2006, p. 28.

[33] John Carroll (with Richard Longes Carroll, Philip Jones and Patricia Vickers-Rich), "Review of the National Museum of Australia, its exhibitions and public programs: a report to the Council of the National Museum of Australia" (Canberra, 2003), (available from: http://www.nma.gov.au/shared/libraries/attachments/review/review_report_20030715/files/552/ReviewReport 20030715.pdf; accessed 19 June 2007). See also: Crotty and Bonnell, "Australia's History under Howard, 1996-2007", p. 13; Macintyre and Clark, *The History Wars*, chapter 10.

[34] Anna Clark, "Coalition of the Uncertain: Classroom Responses to Debates about History Teaching", *History Australia*, Vol. 4, 1 (2007), pp. 12.1-12.12; John Hirst, "Australia: The Official History", *The Monthly*, 31 (February 2008), (available from: http://www.themonthly.com.au/tm/node/781; accessed 24 April 2009).

influential scholarly work in the area of historical understanding,[35] the message from politicians was much simpler. Such an approach not only narrowed the purpose and value of history, but further polarised debate over the past. By ruling out the possibility of multiple perspectives and contrasting views, these interventions by the Howard Government confirmed historical debate in Australia as a "choice" between competing national narratives.

III. Where do the "History Wars" leave history?

Despite this increasing government investment in Australian history, such political claims on the past are nevertheless difficult to untangle. To what extent are politicians defining public opinion on national history, for example, and to what extent are *being defined* by it? How cynical can we be—as scholars, as students—in separating politicians' personal views about Australian history from those political strategies, which we know to be so potent and persuasive? Judith Brett has convincingly argued that John Howard's historical reading surely responds to the views of "mainstream Australia" as much as it helps consolidate them.[36] Martin Crotty and Andrew Bonnell also detected sincerity in Howard's "attachment to conservative social values". Yet they count him as "a highly strategic and purposive political operator, who has sought to entrench and extend the hegemony of the right in the Australian political landscape".[37]

This utilisation of history is a powerful political strategy precisely because it is so personal and persuasive. By *doing* history, politicians endlessly negotiate that relationship between responding to public sentiment and somehow forming it. In his Redfern Park speech, Keating both stamped his own sense of Australian history on the occasion and responded to a growing movement for reconciliation. Likewise, Howard's historical rejection of Keating's progressive narrative was both personal and calculated.

---

[35] For an overview of concepts of historical understanding, see: Peter Seixas, "What Is Historical Consciousness", in *To the Past: History Education, Public Memory, and Citizenship in Canada*, edited by Ruth Sandwell (Toronto, 2006), pp. 11-22; Tony Taylor and Carmel Young, "Making History: A Guide for the Teaching and Learning of History in Australian Schools" (Canberra, 2003); Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, 2001).

[36] Judith Brett, "Relaxed and Comfortable: The Liberal Party's Australia", *Quarterly Essay*, 19 (2005), pp. 36-40.

[37] Crotty and Bonnell, "Australia's History under Howard, 1996-2007", p. 150

The complexity of this political-historical relationship should not prevent those tactics being dissected, however. Political usage of the past is inherently selective and conditional. The grounds Howard gave for his dismissal of Keating's narrative, for example—that Australians should not feel responsible for the acts of previous generations—was far from universally applied. For one thing, Howard's historical cord cutting did not extend to Australia's war veterans, whose legacy was enshrined by the Howard government in Parliament and in schools. "We claim from them a heritage of personal courage and initiative", Howard proclaimed on a visit to Gallipoli in 2000. "We come to join with those that rest here in a shared love of our nation".[38] Yet those comments came only weeks after the federal government refused to acknowledge that the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families over the best part of the twentieth century constituted a "Stolen Generation".[39] While the unsavoury aspects of Australian history could be quietly forgotten, the inheritance from its founding heroes was unbroken.

Contrast that historical engagement with newly elected Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's eight years later. On 13 February 2008, Rudd stood before the national parliament and apologised to the Stolen Generations, many of whom filled the parliamentary gallery before him. "These stories cry out to be heard", insisted the prime minister, "they cry out for an apology". He went on: "It is time to reconcile. It is time to recognise the injustices of the past. It is time to say sorry. It is time to move forward together."[40]

While Howard's historical refusal strengthened his appeal among a significant sector of the Australian population, so too did Rudd's apology. Howard consolidated his support among the "average Australians" he courted and identified with. Rudd, meanwhile, spoke to a more progressive (and growing) section of the community that demanded historical recognition of the government's role in Indigenous dispossession and dislocation. Simply put, both these appeals to the past were

---

[38] John Howard, "Pilgrimage to define the future of a nation (speech made at Gallipoli service, 25 April 2000)", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 April 2000, p. 15.

[39] John Herron, "A generation was not stolen (Federal Government's submission to the Senate inquiry)", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 2000, p. 15.

[40] Kevin Rudd, "Apology to the Stolen Generations", *Australian*, 13 February 2008 (available from: http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/bfull-textb/2008/02/12/1202760291188.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1; accessed 13 February 2008).

personal *and* political. Both also strengthened and alienated the respective governments' standings with various groups in Australian society.

Tens of thousands of Australians watched Rudd's apology from their homes, at schools, and at public screens set up around the country. His apology filled the local media with countless editorials, stories, and a series of powerful images. For those who campaigned for an apology for years it was a momentous and moving occasion.[41] But not everyone was captivated. "I'm disgusted", one caller rang in to the controversial and populist Sydney talkback radio host, Alan Jones. Kevin Rudd "makes out that we've done nothing but destroy this country".[42] In a letter to the Adelaide *Advertiser*, Michael Sherman also expressed dismay: "Seeing that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is apologising for things in the past that he is not responsible for, I think he should also apologise for the extinction of the dinosaurs and for Hitler invading Poland."[43]

Such mixed response highlights the paradox of this debate: while politicians use history to galvanise national sentiment and to locate themselves at its core, this is problematic for a discipline that has become so inherently contested since the emergence of critical new voices over the last forty years. This paradox reveals a cost to the complex relationship between politics and history. Memoirs and diaries offer valuable insights into the world of politics and politicians' place in history. And for many, a genuine interest in the past motivates an active historical engagement. But when these politicians seek to claim competing national narratives for political gain, the simplicity of their historical disagreement becomes painfully apparent. Australian history has been reduced to a shallow divide between progressive revision and conservative affirmation. The rhetoric of the debate, of "black armbands", "balance sheets" and "history wars" confirms an enduring polarisation of Australian political history, but does little to reveal *why* history is so contested and why it generates such political engagement.

---

[41] Yuko Narushima, Edmund Tadros and Leesha McKenny, "Relief, and renewed optimism", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 February 2008, p. 6; Steve Waldon, "Cheers, tears and some turned backs as Melburnians watch proceedings", *Age*, 14 February 2008, p. 4; "Emotion-charged day", *Canberra Times*, 14 February 2008, p. 14; Stuart Rintoul, "Renaissance moment for nation's soul", *Australian*, 14 February 2008, p. 1; "Tears of relief", *Herald Sun*, 14 February 2008, p. 1.
[42] Paul Bibby, "Radio callers outraged: I'm disgusted, says one", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 February 2008, p. 5.
[43] Michael Sherman, "Letter", *Advertiser*, 4 February 2008, p. 21.

Part of the problem is the parochial nature of this historical dispute. There is little in its discourse (excluding perhaps scholarly analysis) that makes reference to the debate's considerable international context. Around the world, various "history wars" have broken out over museum exhibits, national commemorations and history textbooks. The question of whether to acknowledge Japanese war crimes in school history texts has generated significant public discussion and political intervention. Likewise, debates in the US surrounding the *Enola Gay* exhibition at the Smithsonian Museum in 1994, as well as the development of National History Standards for schools, embroiled politicians and public commentators around the country.[44] Countless other examples can be found in Germany, the UK, New Zealand, and so on.[45]

These debates all exhibit the same characteristics: the same obsessive collective pronouns and terminology, as well as the same parochialism and national preoccupations. Such a global discourse of dispute surely deserves a substantive comparative history to come to terms with its breadth. In Australia, meanwhile, any sense of complexity and coverage has been largely hidden within a "semantic war", to use the phrase of Martin Crotty and Andrew Bonnell, which has polarised the community and left historians in the difficult position of attempting to analyse the debates without somehow being enveloped by their stark political divisions.[46]

The politics of Australian history is now firmly entrenched. We need only look back over the political cycles in the country's recent history to see this influence where a change in government has meant a corresponding change to the prevailing national narrative. Such is the familiarity of politicians' use of the past that its rewards are by now a cliché. Perhaps invoking George Orwell, the

---

[44] Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (London, 1995); Laura Hein and Mark Seldon (eds), *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany and the United States* (New York, 2000); Richard H. Kohn, "History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's *Enola Gay* Exhibition", *Journal of American History* (1995), pp. 1036-1063; Edward T. Linenthal, "Struggling with History and Memory", *Journal of American* History (1995), pp. 1094-1101; Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York, 1997); Linda Symcox, *Whose History?*

[45] A. Dirk Moses, "Coming to Terms with Genocidal Pasts in Comparative Perspective: Germany and Australia", *Aboriginal History* 25 (2001), pp. 91-115; Robert Phillips, *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State*; Grant Young, "The Waitangi Tribunal and Gothic Histories of New Zealand", paper presented at the Antipodean Gothic Conference, Massey University, Albany, New Zealand, December 2002.

[46] Crotty and Bonnell, "Australia's History under Howard, 1996-2007", p. 150.

historian Michael Stürmer wrote that "Whoever supplies memory, shapes concepts, and interprets the past ... will win the future".[47] And for their part, politicians have been quick to capitalise on the power of the national past, inserting their own historical values and beliefs at the centre of an unpartisan and unbroken national narrative. But a fundamental question remains: while the history wars undoubtedly make for "good politics", are they good history?

Historical understanding demands the capacity to critically engage with the subject: to constantly reconcile judging the past from our own present values and empathising with people from another age; to understand how historical interpretations change over time; and to consider different points of view.[48] In these "warlike tropes" of debate, however, contrasting arguments are immediately and neatly divided and there is little room for constructive disagreement.[49] As Crotty and Bonnell lament, "Undoubtedly, the politicization of Australian history has been detrimental to academic and public debate". Furthermore, they suggest,

> Historians have had their integrity called into question, and the merit of any historical writing is publicly assessed by whether it is affirming on one hand or "black armband" on the other. Considerations of how enlightening, instructive, or original the work is take second place in a "culture wars" environment.[50]

Such an environment has made any critical analysis of the history wars very difficult indeed. Accounts of the debate are all too easily located in one or other political camps, irrespective of the intentions of authors. And despite Crotty and Bonnell's optimistic assessment that the *practice* of history by historians has been largely unaffected by the divisiveness of debate,[51] the political intrusion of the history wars has undoubtedly perpetuated a polarised frame of political history in Australia (and elsewhere).

---

[47] Cited in Josef Joffe, "The Battle of the Historians", p. 77.

[48] See, Stefan Berger, "Introduction", in *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective*, ed. Stefan Berger (Hampshire; New York, 2007), p. 24, who writes: "such a vision of history writing as permanent critique of identitarian constructions is perhaps the best hope against the nasty underbelly of national history".

[49] Ann Curthoys, "Thinking About History" *AHA Bulletin*, 83 (1996), p. 25.

[50] Crotty and Bonnell, "Australia's History under Howard, 1996-2007", pp. 162-163.

[51] Crotty and Bonnell, "Australia's History under Howard, 1996-2007", p. 163.

Ultimately, politicians' mounting claims on the past have served to entrench the simplicity of historical disagreement in Australia. It remains to be seen how these debates will play out under the new Rudd government. For just as belief in the nation's past is deeply held by many people, including politicians, it is also a powerful political tool. Politicians' historical engagement has undoubtedly been influenced by dramatic historiographical shifts since the 1960s and 70s, where conventional political history was so radically challenged and the discipline became a heated site of debate. Yet the cost of this inevitable connection between politicians and the past has been to simplify Australian history to a public and divisive contest. While the linguistic turn may have shifted political history towards a more inclusive, representative historical analysis, the politicised debate in its wake has been anything but.