Reverse Racism in Australia

The 'black armband' view of history is divisive

by Geoffrey Blainey

In the past two decades a tidal wave of opinion has swept across a big section of educated Australia. It has challenged and changed the way people think about the nation's past, and especially about Aborigines. This new wave is a mixture of compassion and political cunning, high principle and lack of principle. Curiously, a citadel of the new attitude is the High Court.

This view of history is increasingly called the "black armband" view. Prime Minister John Howard recently opposed it in his Menzies memorial lecture, and his words provoked indignant replies from people as diverse as Gough Whitlam and Lois O'Donoghue. The gist of their complaint is that Howard is trying to sanitize Australia's past. My view is that he is probably trying to restore sanity.

For the past 97 years[1] most Australians have tended to see their nation's history as a wide-ranging success. In their eyes the blunders and defects have been far out-weighed by the merits. Among the merits are the shaping of one of the world's oldest continuing democracies, the pio-neering of a harsh environment, the winning of a high standard of living, and a conspicuous role in fighting on what was once seen as the side of virtue in two world wars.

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Laments

The black armband view disputes this picture. It often laments Australia's abuse of the natural environment, attitudes to women and minorities, and above all the treatment of the Aborigines. In its view the minuses virtually wipe out the pluses. Such a swing in the overall interpretation of the past has happened before but it is the speed of this swing, and its effects on the nation's life, that invite comment. In my mind the swing, useful in pointing to past wrongs, has run wild. Common sense is the victim. Moreover the black armband view, while pretending to be anti-racist, is intent on permanently dividing Australia on the basis of race.

Many historians preach a black armband view, especially when they write on black-white relations; but the view is more emphatic outside than inside history books. It is noticeable on the TV news, ABC radio, and the high-brow dailies. It is vigorous in the Canberra-based media, whose members mostly cheered aloud when the goal of black armband ideology, the Native Title Bill, was bulldozed through federal parliament by the Keating Government which, it now transpires, did not know what the bill portended. In fairness to Paul Keating he could not know, partly because that black armband tribunal, the High Court, was still in the process of

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discovering the law.

Australia's history is clearly in dispute, and there will never be full agreement. For example, some commentators imply that the Aborigines should have been left to live in isolation in Australia and that outsiders should never have settled here. This opinion is unrealistic. The Aborigines of today clearly have no serious wish to return to the way of life, often attractive, which their ancestors lived in 1788.

"The Native Title Act tries to revive a past that is beyond resurrection."

Many Australian wearers of the black armband also insist that it was disgraceful that the British took over this land without paying compensation for real estate and without signing a treaty. I have sympathy with their view, but what do they think should have happened?

There is probably no way in which an Aboriginal treaty could have been signed in 1788 — a treaty that was clearly understood by both sides. Nor is there any way in which land could have been fairly purchased. The British and Aboriginal concepts of authority, ownership, and land usage were too far apart for each side to understand the other. The difficulty was much more acute here than in the overwhelming majority of the world's lands invaded or entered by outsiders. For tens of thousands of Aborigines the resultant loss, pain and bewilderment was extreme.

Even if there had been a flood of good will on both sides in 1788, most of the Aboriginal people would tragically have died through diseases to which they had no immunity. Diseases such as smallpox spread with lightning speed and often leapt hundreds of kilometers ahead of the white shepherds and settlers.

Dispossession

At least two judges of the High Court appear not to have completed their research on the facts of the Aboriginals' dispossession, facts which they said were "of critical importance" in their deciding whether native title still exists. Justice Deane and Justice Gaudron did not know that disease was the main killer of Aborigines. They preferred to pin the blame on the British and look for ways of compensating Aborigines for what they called "a national legacy of unutterable shame."

It endangers the good name of the High Court when its judges gather their evidence in private, rather than through the cut and thrust of argument and the testing of evidence in an open court. It does positive harm when certain judges then pontificate in emotive tones on the basis of near-ignorance. There is no appeal — until the 1980s there was — against the mistakes of members of the High Court in a case of such national importance.

It might be asked, "where did the High Court imbibe its crusading zeal which made it forget the need to conduct a public hearing that might be seen to be just?" After all, the land on Eddie Mabo's Murray Island was the subject of the normal, visible judicial process; but the question of native title on Aboriginal lands — a much more complicated question — was decided in a strange way. Some of the groups whose interests proved to be in grave jeopardy — urban Aborigines and outback pastoral lease-holders — were not permitted even to present their case.

There is much to be regretted and even ashamed of in Australia's past. But the High Court's judgment on Mabo and the passing of the Native Title Act both seemed eminently fair and reasonable because of the fanfare of heartfelt morality that fortified the High Court and a majority of members of the federal parliament.

The Native Title Act rests on a genuine concern for principle and yet judged by that principle it might well be called unprincipled. It embodies a crusade against racial discrimination and yet it sets up a new form of racial discrimination. Land blessed by the Native Title Act is specifically placed under the control of people of one race. It is land with racial cords attached.

Surrender

As the Brisbane legal scholar John Forbes said recently: "It is part of Mabo doctrine that native title is non-assignable, except by surrender to the crown, or within the relevant clan" (in daily

conversation we would probably say "tribe"). The typical land received by Aborigines under native title is intended to be in the hands of one race for perpetuity!

As the Native Title Act runs its course, vast areas of Australia will be reserved permanently for people of one race. Would the authors of this revolutionary Act think it also appropriate if land around Circular Quay was reserved in perpetuity for people, say, of Irish birth, or if land in Canberra is to be owned henceforth only by people of white ancestry?

"Those who one-sidedly depict the early European history of Australia are endangering … the gains of recent years…"

The Native Title Act tries to revive a past that is beyond resurrection. The Act tries to return to systems of land tenure which in most parts of the world were discarded thousands of years ago. Notwithstanding all the ingenuity and merits of that old collectivist form of land tenure, it was sadly inefficient. Huge areas were needed to support few people. The old Aboriginal land system can no more be revived than can the spear or the blunderbuss.

The High Court's majority decision on Wik, delivered last December, continues the confusion. On present indications Wik probably means this: that Aboriginals will be given certain rights over a pastoral lease, and the holders of the pastoral lease and the livestock will retain certain rights. The Aboriginals can buy the sheep and the leasehold if they wish but the Europeans cannot buy the native title rights. Here is an ingenious form of racial discrimination. Nor is it a sensible way of apportioning natural resources in the best interests of a nation, especially a nation in some economic trouble.

Incentive

Australia has every incentive to uphold its own distinctive system of land tenure. The system is based on the principle that land is ultimately to be used in the interests of all Australians. Moreover, land should be used in changing ways as the society and economy alters. The High Court and the Native Title Act, gripped by their black armbands, have weakened that vital principle.

I respect and often admire Aboriginal people. I have long sympathized with the campaign for land rights, although I do not see it as a right. There is a powerful case for granting land; the question is how best to do it, on what terms, on what scale, and on what moral basis.

Don Watson, the talented historian who composed some of Keating's black armband speeches, as well as some of his balanced speeches, now complains that Howard and like-minded historians "pretend that the dark side of human nature doesn't exist." I blinked on reading Watson. When I coined the phrase "black armband view" in 1993, I acknowledged the dark side of human nature and went out of my way to describe how "the treatment of Aborigines was often lamentable."

Those who one-sidedly depict the early European history of Australia are endangering one of the gains of recent years: the willingness to examine the long years of traditional Aboriginal history with sympathy and understanding. Just as the history of European Australia can be denounced from a one-sided point of view, so too can the history of black Australia be depicted by the one-eyed as a story of savagery. To revert to such denunciations would be a loss to all Australians, black and white.

So long as the black armband view is influential — so long as it insists that the treatment of Aboriginals was so disgraceful that no reparations might be adequate, that no reconciliation can be certain of success, and that black racism is justified — then Australia's future as a legitimate nation and even as one nation is in d… TSC

NOTES

[1] For our North American readers: the reference is to Australia's founding as a federation of former colonies in 1901.

[2] Refers to a highly contentious land case.

[3] Another such case.