

What is at stake in Australia's "History Wars"

Part 6: Keating versus Howard

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Below we are publishing the sixth part in a 10-part series written by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. The remaining parts are available at the following links: Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4, Part 5, Part 7, Part 8, Part 9 and Part 10.

By the end of the 1980s, the attacks by the Hawke-Keating government on jobs, wages and social services, coupled with the privatisation of publicly-owned enterprises, had led to a collapse of active support for the Labor Party in broad sections of the working class. Behind the growing alienation lay a deepening social polarisation. Between 1982 and 1994 the top 10 percent of income earners gained a real increase of \$100 per week, while the bottom 10 percent, assisted by improved social welfare payments, gained \$11 per week. But the middle 80 percent, comprising the bulk of the working and middle classes, experienced a decline in their real income. In the 1990 election, the deep-going alienation from the Labor Party among its traditional support base saw the party's primary vote fall to an all-time low of less than 40 percent.

Under these conditions, the Labor government, like its opponents in the Liberal party, sought to develop a program that would see it regain at least some level of mass support.

During his term as prime minister, Paul Keating made the fashioning of a new national consensus—and its identification with the Labor Party—the core of his political agenda. Whereas John Howard could be described as the consummate expression of the prejudices of so-called middle Australia in the 1950s, Keating's prominence derived, above all, from his adaptability.

Insofar as a political program was concerned, Keating constituted something of an empty vessel, shaping himself to the requirements of the day and using his wit, and talent for invective, to advance his objectives. Keating gained his start as an apparatchik within the right-wing machine of the NSW Labor Party. In the early period of his parliamentary career, he became an adherent of the minerals and energy program associated with Whitlam government minister, Rex Connor. The program called for the national development of energy resources.

During Labor's period in opposition, from the ousting of the Whitlam government in 1975—the "Canberra coup"—to the defeat of the Fraser Liberal government in 1983, Keating remained Labor spokesman in this area. But in 1983 he was catapulted into the post of treasurer in the Hawke Labor government. Keating had virtually no experience in finance. But he did have one specific talent—the ability to fight openly for the new government's free market agenda, and the will to attack all those within the party who tried to defend its past adherence to public ownership and national economic regulation. Anyone who championed the old reformist agenda was denounced as a "Balmain basket weaver" as Keating oversaw the rewriting of Labor's platform to meet the new requirements of finance

capital.

Whereas Howard sought to tap into "White Australia" prejudices to provide the basis for his version of the national ethos, Keating attempted to forge a new Australian nationalism more in tune with the processes of globalisation—emphasising multi-culturalism and Aboriginal reconciliation.

The Republic and Reconciliation

Keating's agenda required excursions into history, which, in turn, led to his proposal to break with the British monarchy and establish an Australian republic. Reviewing the origins of Australia's "nationhood" Keating extolled the sacrifices of Australian soldiers in war and the country's independence from Britain. In February 1992, on the 50th anniversary of the fall of Singapore, Keating accused Britain of having deserted Australia and denounced the Liberal and National parties as a "British bootstraps" coalition. They were, he said, "the same old fogies who doffed their lids and tugged the forelock to the British establishment." [1]

For Keating, the call for a republic expressed the forward-looking character of the Labor Party—its commitment to openness and the new challenges of globalisation—as opposed to the Liberal Party, which had kept Australia tied to Britain, and remained backward looking. This was, of course, historical fiction—the White Australia, protectionist, empire-supporting program of the past had enjoyed total bi-partisan support.

But along with the program of Aboriginal reconciliation, it served to cultivate a base of support for Labor among sections of the middle class who regarded themselves as socially and politically progressive, and for whom globalisation and the deregulation of the Australian economy had brought definite material benefits.

Keating was not the initiator of the project to construct a new national ethos. Rather, as in all his previous initiatives, he was responding to definite pressures from within ruling circles. The turn to Asia was based on the recognition that Australian interests might not always coincide—and might even conflict—with those of its long-time allies, Britain and the United States. This was certainly one of the factors motivating Keating's move against Hawke, and the support it received from virtually all sections of the mass media when Keating toppled Hawke as prime minister at the end of 1991. The new orientation in foreign policy was to find its highest expression in the new Keating government's decision to form a security pact with Suharto's regime in Indonesia without informing the United States—something that would have been unthinkable in the past.

Aboriginal reconciliation lay at the heart of the new national agenda, and, as Keating was to make clear, this was intimately bound up with his orientation to Asia. In 1992, at the end of his first year as prime minister, Keating made a speech at Redfern Park in which he outlined the key role

of “reconciliation” in the construction of a new nationalism. The speech has gone down in history as an acknowledgement of the crimes committed against the Aboriginal population. But this acknowledgement was, itself, part of the perspective of forming of a new national identity—essential if Australia were to enhance its position in the Asian region. “We cannot simply sweep injustice aside,” Keating declared. “Even if our own conscience allowed us to, I am sure that in due course, the world and the people of the region would not. There should be no mistake about this—our success in resolving these issues will have a significant bearing on our standing in the world.”

The impetus for the so-called reconciliation process came from the highest levels of the state. Earlier that year, in its Mabo decision, the High Court acknowledged that there was a prior existing native title to land. In their judgment, Justices Deane and Gaudron drew out the relationship of this question to the forging of a new nationalism. “Dispossession,” they wrote, “is the darkest aspect of the history of this nation. This nation as a whole must remain diminished unless and until there is an acknowledgement of, and retreat from, those past injustices.” [2]

Howard’s return to Liberal leadership

One of the reasons Howard had lost the leadership of the Liberal Party in 1989 was that he was seen as being too explicit on the issue of Asian immigration. The economic interests of Australian capitalism were, after all, becoming increasingly integrated into the Asian economies. Howard did represent, however, a certain constituency, both within the Liberal Party and more broadly. After losing the 1990 election under Peacock, the Liberals turned to John Hewson and his unabashed “free market” Fightback program. But Hewson proved incapable of commanding a sufficient base of support for Fightback. Thus, despite the Labor government’s ever-increasing unpopularity, in 1993 Keating was able to make a last-ditch populist appeal and secure victory in what had been seen as an unwinnable election.

After a short and disastrous leadership episode with Alexander Downer—a kind of over-grown private schoolboy prefect, obsequious to those above him, a bully to those below—the Liberals turned for a second time to Howard, re-installing him as leader in 1995. Again, Howard enthusiastically turned to developing a platform that maintained and extended Labor’s free market policies—all of which had initially been proposed by the Liberals—while, at the same time, building a base of support among opponents of these policies.

Howard’s broad strategy was, on the one hand, to say as little as possible on policy issues in the lead-up to the 1996 election—maintaining a “small target” following the lessons of the Hewson loss. On the other hand he sought to mobilise opposition to the Labor government on the basis of an appeal to right-wing populist prejudices.

This meant returning to the battleground in the History Wars. Even before resuming the Liberal Party leadership, Howard had been the most prominent Liberal opponent of Keating’s outlook on Australian history. In January 1993, for example, he declared: “The broader debate about Australian society involves a clash between what can be called the optimists and the apologists. The optimists essentially take the view that Australian nationhood has been a success, and that despite many flaws and imperfections, there have emerged distinctive Australian characteristics of humanity, fairness, egalitarianism and individual risk taking. By contrast, the apologists take a basically negative view of Australian history, and light upon every great national occasion not to celebrate Australia’s achievements, but to attempt the coercion of all of us into a collective act of contrition for the past. The apologists should not be allowed to capture our centenary celebration.” [3]

Geoffrey Blainey sensed that a new wind was blowing and took up arms in his Latham lecture, delivered in 1993.

“To some extent my generation was reared on the Three Cheers view of history. This patriotic view of our past had a long run. It saw Australian

history as largely a success. While the convict era was a source of shame or unease, nearly everything that came after was believed to be pretty good. There is a rival view, which I call the Black Armband view of history. In recent years it has assailed the optimistic view of history. The black armbands were quietly worn in official circles in 1988. The multicultural folk busily preached their message that until they arrived much of Australian history was a disgrace. The past treatment of Aborigines, of Chinese, of Kanakas, of non-British migrants, of women, the very old, the very young, and the poor was singled out, sometimes legitimately, sometimes not. ... The Black Armband view of history might well represent the swing of the pendulum from a position that had been too favourable, too self congratulatory, to an opposite extreme that is even more unreal and decidedly jaundiced.” [4]

As in the 1980s, Howard was quick to follow Blainey. In a speech delivered in mid-1993 he described “Keating’s convoluted and usually erroneous excursions into Australia’s past” as exhibiting “many of the features of what Geoffrey Blainey has so aptly called ‘the black armband’ view of Australian history. Many republicans seek a rewriting of Australian history which demonises the British connection and marginalises the liberal/conservative contribution to our institutions and political thought.” [5]

Discussing the relationship of history to politics in 1994, Howard insisted that Liberals should not “underestimate the significance of Australian nationalism”. “There are still far too few Liberals who fully comprehend just how committed Paul Keating and many in the Labor Party are to the quite ruthless use of history—or more particularly their version of it—as a political weapon. Not only do they wish to reinterpret Australian history to promote their contemporary political objectives, but they also wish to do so to marginalise the contribution of the liberal-conservative side of Australian politics and entrench the Labor Party as the only true product of Australia’s political soil.” [6]

The constituency to which Howard was appealing became especially clear in the wake of the maiden speech to parliament delivered by Pauline Hanson in September 1996. Hanson, a disendorsed Liberal, had stood for parliament on the basis of explicitly racist positions. In his response to her claims that Asian immigrants were overrunning the country, and that Aborigines were receiving special privileges, Howard made no denunciation of her racism. Instead, he welcomed freedom of speech. Asked in a radio interview whether he agreed with Hanson’s remarks, Howard replied that he believed in her right to say what she did, and that some of the things she had said were an “accurate reflection of what people feel”.

Howard welcomed Hanson’s right-wing populism because it opened the way for his own version of nationalism, based on a repudiation of so-called “cultural elites” and “political correctness,” and appeals to what he termed the “mainstream.” For Howard, Hanson’s attacks on immigrants, refugees, and Aborigines were a political godsend. With the assistance of the media, they created a political atmosphere conducive to his program. The political and media establishment only began to oppose Hanson in the aftermath of the 1998 Queensland state election, when popular support for her One Nation Party started to threaten the Liberal Party’s own electoral base. And even then, the fight against Hanson was carried out on the legal—not the political—front. At the very time government leaders were secretly organising to bring her down, Howard was implementing One Nation’s policies on refugees—replacing full resident status with three-year temporary protection visas.

A new ideological offensive

Howard established the relationship between his political program and the broader questions of Australian history in a series of speeches following his election as prime minister in March 1996.

In the Sir Thomas Playford lecture at Adelaide Town Hall on July 5, 1996, Howard spoke of Keating’s desire to “rewrite Australian history”

and to “stifle voices of dissent.” “The fact is that the history of our nation is the story of all our people and it is a story for all our people. It is owned by no-one. It is not the story of some general conspiracy or manipulation: it is a history which has its flaws—certainly—but which broadly constitutes a scale of heroic and unique achievement against great odds.” [7]

Speaking in parliament on October 30, 1996, amid the controversy sparked by Hanson’s speech, Howard declared: “I profoundly reject the black armband view of Australian history. I believe 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. I think there is a yearning in the Australian community right across the political divide for its leader to enunciate more pride and sense of achievement in what has gone before us. I think we have been too apologetic about our history in the past. I believe it is tremendously important, particularly as we approach the centenary of the Federation of Australia, that the Australian achievement has been a heroic one, a courageous one and a humanitarian one.” [8]

In a radio interview on October 24, 1966, Howard drew the connection between economic and social insecurities and the conflict over history. “I understand the sense of unease and insecurity that a lot of people feel about their jobs, about the future of Australia. I think we’ve had too much ... we talk negatively about the past. I sympathise fundamentally with Australians who are insulted when they are told that we have a racist bigoted past. And Australians are told that quite regularly. Our children are taught that. Some of the school curricula go close to teaching children that we have a racist bigoted past. Now of course we treated Aborigines very, very badly in the past ... but to tell children who themselves have been no part of it, that we’re all a part of a racist bigoted history is something that Australians reject.” [9]

Of course, Howard had no objection to children taking part in celebrations of historical events in which he considered “Australians” were able to take pride, despite the fact that, here too, they had taken no part in those events. And Howard was by no means alone in emphasising positive national history and denouncing negative teaching to children. In Japan, there has been a continuing controversy over the writing of history textbooks to exclude, or at least downplay, the actions of the Japanese army in China and other parts of Asia during the 1930s and the Second World War.

Howard returned to the role of history in the political agenda in the Sir Robert Menzies lecture on November 18, 1996. “I have spoken tonight of the need to guard against the rewriting of Australian political history, and, in particular, to ensure that the contribution of Robert Menzies and the Liberal tradition are accorded their proper place in it. There is, of course, a related and broader challenge involved. And that is to 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. This black armband view of our past reflects a belief that most 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. 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.” [10]

Howard’s pronouncements marked the beginning of a new ideological offensive. They were to be followed by articles in the right-wing magazine *Quadrant*, which devoted considerable resources to Windschuttle’s initial publications on Aboriginal history, and by the emergence of a series of strident commentators in the daily press.

The publication of Windschuttle’s book in 2002 marked a new stage. The viciousness of his charge that the Tasmanian Aborigines were murderers, robbers and pimps who were responsible for their own demise, and, even more significantly, the support which he received from

powerful interests in the mass media, signified that deep-going historical issues were now coming to the surface. It is to some of these issues that we shall now turn.

Notes:

- 1) cited in McKenna, op cit, p. 8
- 2) cited in Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, p. 263
- 3) cited in Markus, op cit, p. 93
- 4) cited in McKenna, op cit
- 5) cited in Markus, op cit, p. 93
- 6) cited in Markus, op cit, p. 92
- 7) cited in McKenna, op cit
- 8) *Hansard*, October 30, 1996
- 9) cited in McKenna, op cit
- 10) *ibid*



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