

Werriwa by-election

Iraq, Macquarie Fields and Australia's “History Wars”

Nick Beams
16 March 2005

Below are the remarks delivered by Nick Beams, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and a member of the international editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site, to the SEP election meeting in Green Valley on Sunday, March 13, 2005.

Just over two years ago, a book was published which claimed to disprove previous historical analyses of the murderous destruction of Aboriginal society during the colonial settlement of Australia. It placed particular emphasis on Tasmania, where the original tribal population had been completely wiped out within the space of just two generations.

According to Keith Windschuttle, author of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, this history of colonial murder and repression had been created by left-wing historians, influenced by the idea of national liberation struggles advanced in the 1960s, and eager to pursue a contemporary political agenda.

Windschuttle was not only concerned with exposing what he called the lies and falsifications of these historians, he was in no doubt, also, that there were contemporary issues at stake. As he put it in the introduction to *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*: “The debate over Aboriginal history goes far beyond its ostensible subject: it is about the character of the nation and, ultimately, the calibre of the civilisation Britain brought to these shores in 1788.”

In other words, what was at stake was the nature of capitalist society as a whole. That is why this has been such a sensitive issue. To study and understand a thing, one must study its origins and development. Capitalist society in Australia, like capitalist society everywhere, was born, as Marx said, with “blood dripping from every pore”.

The bourgeoisie always has an interest in trying to cover that over and hide the questions of history, particularly as it seeks to impose its agenda upon the working masses.

In dealing with Tasmania, however, Windschuttle had one major problem—the tribal Aboriginal population had been completely destroyed. Windschuttle dealt with this in two ways. First, he downplayed the extent of the massacres and then he blamed the victims themselves. He insisted that the Aborigines who fought against colonial settlement did not do so because they had been driven from their land by the ever-expanding sheep farming. Rather they were motivated by greed. They were, he said, like “junkies raiding a service station” in search of cash.

Second, he claimed that the tribal population died out because of their isolation, which made them vulnerable to disease. It was also because the male population prostituted and traded its women and so lost the ability to reproduce itself. In the end, it was all their fault.

As for the British Empire, Windschuttle claimed it was really quite a benign institution whose officials were heavily influenced by the ideas of the evangelical Christian movement. British colonisation was, he said, “the least violent of all Europe’s encounters with the New World”.

The question that arose after the publication of Windschuttle’s outpourings was the following: why was his reactionary diatribe not dismissed and the book looked at as some historical curiosity? Why, on the contrary, was it hailed? Dozens of articles, newspaper columns and radio and television debates focussed on Windschuttle’s claims.

A whole battery of columnists from the Murdoch press was wheeled into action and mobilised to fire broadsides at the so-called left-wing perpetrators of the lies and distortions that Windschuttle had exposed. There were even demands, for example, by the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, that certain academics be dismissed from their posts, for their “lying” over the statistics of the murder of the Aboriginal population in Tasmania.

Interestingly enough, such demands weren’t repeated regarding the Howard government and its lies over the Iraq war. People could be driven out of their academic positions because of possible errors in their footnotes, but when it came to the main script for a war—the lies over “weapons of mass destruction”—we had justifications from the very same media pundits.

These columnists knew very little about history, but that was not what attracted them to Windschuttle’s positions. They recognised that this was really a battle over a contemporary agenda. The portrayal of early colonial society put forward by Windschuttle related to very modern issues, above all the free market agenda that is the centre-piece of the program of all governments, in Australia and internationally.

Looking back over the past two years, the reasons for this political flare-up are clear. Windschuttle’s book, praising the British Empire, was published in the midst of the US build-up for the invasion of Iraq. The war represented the eruption of a new phrase of imperialism and a return to the doctrines of empire which many thought were a thing of the past.

In the recent period, a series of books and articles has been published declaring the need for the United States to establish a global empire, to bring order and stability to the world of the twenty-first century just as the British Empire did in the nineteenth.

The invasion of Iraq was just the beginning. A new era of world history has opened up in which the United States asserts its right to take “preventative action” against any nation it considers may be a threat to its interests. People around the world ask themselves every day: what is the next target? Will it be Syria, or Iran, or North Korea or somewhere else?

The Iraq war marked a decisive turning point in post-war politics because it overturned the doctrine that had been at the centre of international relations since World War II. That is, the doctrine established in the Nuremberg Trials of the Nazi war criminals, which insisted that the crime of the Nazis, from which all their other crimes flowed, was to launch a war of aggression.

That was true not just in a juridical, but in the political sense, and the same truth holds today. The war in Iraq is the source, the origin, of all the

other crimes that have followed. And they have followed thick and fast.

The doctrine of aggressive war today means that not only is torture practised, either directly or indirectly through the so-called policy of rendition, but that the doctrine of torture is now openly discussed in journals, books and articles. There was a perceptive comment on March 5 by the Melbourne *Age* journalist Martin Flanagan. Flanagan normally writes on football. But he felt compelled to write an article explaining that he was shocked to see an advertisement in the *New York Review of Books* for a book in which the use of torture was openly advocated. This is not just an isolated incident.

We know from medical science that the condition of cancer, unless treated, will metastasize and spread throughout the body. The doctrines and concepts associated with the invasion of Iraq are giving rise to a whole set of toxins that are spreading like a cancer throughout the legal system. So-called “enemy combatants” can be held indefinitely without charge, as we see at Guantánamo Bay and elsewhere.

This is accompanied by the doctrine that it is now the task of the accused to prove his or her innocence. The proposition was once that the prosecution had to prove the guilt of the accused, beyond reasonable doubt, through a system of due process—that is, carefully worked out rules and regulations governing evidence and court procedure. This is being overturned.

Take, for example, the case of the recently released Australian Guantánamo Bay detainee Mamdouh Habib. The government has admitted many times that Habib has committed no crime under Australian law and cannot be charged. He has committed no crime under American law and was therefore eventually released. But he returns to Australia and is confronted with demands that he answer for what he was doing in Pakistan and Afghanistan and a question mark hangs over him. What happened to the principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty?

As I have pointed out, the assault on legal rights is a cancer. It spreads from one area to another.

We have a further example in recent remarks by Margaret Cunneen, the NSW Deputy Senior Crown Prosecutor since 2002, who delivered the Sir Ninian Stephen Lecture at the University of Newcastle on March 10. According to Ms Cunneen, one of the main problems with the present legal system is that defence lawyers are not showing sufficient sympathy for the victims of crime and are using all legal means to try to prevent the conviction of their clients!

That is exactly what lawyers are supposed to do. If you don’t have that system, what do you have? Trial by the lynch mob—the mob in this case being the shock-jocks, like Piers Akerman, Alan Jones, Miranda Devine, Janet Albrechtsen, and others trying to inflame public opinion. That is the alternative to due process. Bob Carr, the New South Wales Labor premier, it should be noted, declared he very much supported the remarks of Ms Cunneen.

The SEP holds no brief for the Mayor of Campbelltown, Brenton Banfield. But it is significant that he was excluded as the Labor Party candidate for Werriwa because he had defended people in court who had been charged with sex offences, among other things. This was seen as a possible point of attack for Labor’s opponents.

Two years ago Windschuttle argued that the Tasmanian Aborigines were responsible for their own destruction. He declared it was the outcome of their criminal activities. Now we find the same doctrine being repeated by Carr, as he denounces any assertion that the problems in Macquarie Fields are social in origin. Such a view, he insists, with the support of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, is just to excuse criminal behaviour.

It should hardly surprise us that there should be an attack on the scientific understanding that the individual is a product of social circumstances, and that crime and violence, carried out by individuals, are the product of social conditions. After all, this is a profoundly

revolutionary doctrine. It is profoundly revolutionary because it is profoundly true.

“If man draws all his knowledge, sensation, etc., from the world of the senses and the experience gained in it,” Marx wrote, “the empirical world must be arranged so that in it man experiences and gets used to what is really human and that he becomes aware of himself as man. ... If man is unfree in the materialist sense, i.e., is free not through the negative power to avoid this or that, but through the positive power to assert his true individuality, crime must not be punished in the individual, but the anti-social source of crime must be destroyed, and each man must be given the social scope for the vital manifestation of his being. If man is shaped by his surroundings, his surroundings must be made human. If man is social by nature, he will develop his true nature only in society, and the power of his nature must be measured not by the power of separate individuals but by the power of society” (Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, p. 176).

That is as true today as it was when it was written.

In the past, certain concessions were made to this scientific understanding. There was an acknowledgement by the Labor Party and its leaders that problems of crime, drug abuse, health, and so on, were products of society and that the task was to change it. Through the struggle to change society, one changed individuals and developed true humanity. The issue was not individuals as such, but individuals in society.

That is no longer the case. Consider the latest outburst from Carr. There were, he acknowledged, underlying social causes for the conflicts in Macquarie Fields, but those underlying issues were criminality. The wonders of science! Carr tells us the propensity to commit crime is explained by criminality. The old argument that sleep can be induced by certain chemicals because they have soporific powers used to be put forward as an example of a false philosophical method. Now it is replicated by the NSW premier.

What interests us here is not so much the completely irrationality of Carr’s ravings, but the underlying reason for it.

The capitalist order and its political representatives used to make concessions to the scientific understanding of the nature of crime and other problems in the days when they could offer certain social reforms. Those days have gone. Now individuals must try to scramble up the “ladder of opportunity”, clawing at those above and kicking at those below. That is the doctrine of the “free market”, imposed, in the final analysis, by the police. That is the meaning of Macquarie Fields.

There is a very profound connection between the eruption of imperialist war, and the police-state response to deepening social inequality. They are two interconnected aspects of the one social reality.

The invasion of Iraq has had nothing to do with “weapons of mass destruction”. It equally has had nothing to do with bringing democracy to the Middle East. It was a pre-emptive strike by the United States, above all against its major capitalist rivals in Europe and Asia. It was directed against the possibility that German, French, Japanese, Chinese, or Russian corporations would get their hands on the oil riches of Iraq and the profits flowing from the reconstruction of the country, rather than American companies. It was a war to establish domination and control over resources, raw materials and markets—a struggle that has erupted on a worldwide front.

This struggle sounds a profound warning to the international working class. The twenty-first century is opening in ways very similar to the twentieth—a period characterised by conflicts and struggles among the major capitalist powers to establish dominance over markets and spheres of influence. That led inexorably to the eruption of world war in 1914 and the unleashing of barbarism the like of which mankind had not seen.

The conflict for resources, markets, and ultimately for profits, is prosecuted on the home front as well. It is undertaken by means of a never-ending offensive against the social position of the working class, through

the destruction of jobs, conditions and attacks on social services and facilities. Under conditions where this produces deepening social polarisation, so the state itself is mobilised to deal with it. As we have emphasised throughout this campaign, the methods deployed in Macquarie Fields today will be used more broadly tomorrow. As a resident correctly remarked to Mike Head, the people in the suburb are being used as guinea pigs for the type of repression that is to come.

What is the perspective of the SEP? First of all, we insist that there are no answers to be found for the problems facing the working class in this country or internationally within the existing political order. Nor is there any answer to be found in conflicts with the state—throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails and attacking the police. It is a far more radical task that has to be undertaken; the complete reconstruction of society as a whole.

In saying that there is no answer to be found within the existing political framework, that does not mean a rejection of politics. It means understanding the failure of the old perspective of trying to put pressure on this or that political party to carry out reforms within the existing order.

The task ahead is the construction of an independent, international socialist movement of the working class to reorganise society on a global scale, in the interests of humanity as whole.

What are the problems that face the working class today? Above all, problems of perspective. Broad sections of the population, the working masses around the world, know that there is something terribly and radically wrong with the present organisation of society. How could it be otherwise in conditions of war and deepening social problems and conflicts.

The problem is not that people do not understand that there are great tasks that must be tackled, but that they see no perspective on which such a struggle can be carried out.

Here we come to the central point of the political campaign of the bourgeoisie and its representatives over the past decade-and-a-half: the conception that the collapse of the Soviet Union spelt the final end of socialism and hence of any alternative to the free market agenda.

One might recall that when that event took place one of the first people to get up on his hind legs to declare this newfound wisdom was none other than Bob Carr. This life-long enemy of Marxism could not get to Europe fast enough after the collapse of the Berlin Wall to proclaim that socialism was finished.

What really collapsed in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was not socialism and Marxism, but Stalinism and its nationalist program of “socialism in one country.” This was the analysis advanced by our party, the International Committee of the Fourth International. It has stood the test. History does teach us things. It is possible to make assessments of historical prognoses. We said that the demise of the USSR was not only the collapse of Stalinism, but the end of all programs based on a nationalist ideology.

If it really had represented the end of socialism and the death of Marxism, then we would have seen a great flowering of all those parties and organisations that had fought against the Marxist perspective, such as the Labor Party and the trade union bureaucracy. Now with the great enemy slain they would undergo a resurgence.

The exact opposite has taken place. The decay and disintegration of the Labor Party and the trade union apparatuses in this country and internationally goes on apace.

Our focus in this election has been on ideas. The most important task facing the working class is the development of a perspective and an understanding of the history of the twentieth century and the place of the working class within that historical process.

What is needed is a perspective grounded upon the necessity for the reconstruction of society as a whole and the understanding that the very development of mankind’s productive forces has completely shattered the

old framework of national states. There is not a single problem that we confront today that can be dealt with on a national basis.

The tasks that confront humanity are global in scope and require the development of an international revolutionary party. That is why we established the *World Socialist Web Site* in 1998 and why we are fighting to extend its influence and its capacity to reach out to the most advanced sections of the working class and youth all over the world. It is to construct the international party of social revolution, which is needed for the coming struggles ahead.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact