

History, Nationalism and Anzac Day

As an Aboriginal person who is acutely aware that there are many Aboriginal families who had relatives who fought at Gallipoli, including members of my own family, I am nevertheless always deeply concerned each Anzac Day about the way in which Gallipoli has become so politicised in the evolving memory of so many Australians. As historian Don Watson has written, "The more politicians and media commentators talk of the values of Anzac Day, traduce it for convenient contemporary instruction and daub themselves with the soldiers' moral courage, the more like a kitsch religion it becomes."

In the process of the politicisation of Anzac Day and events almost 100 years ago at Gallipoli, I feel that many Australians are further entrenching an attitude of denial about key aspects of their own history and seeking to divert attention away from earlier wars that had more to do with defining the Australian national character than Gallipoli did. By that I mean the colonial 'wars' that many in Australia still have great difficulty in even accepting as wars.

That our national historical memory has been politicised can be seen through two phases of recent Australian history. The first phase was the sudden outburst of patriotic nationalism that emerged during the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations. This event was tagged in a multi-million dollar publicity campaign as the "Celebration of a Nation", a slogan that was at the time parodied by Aboriginal activists as the "Masturbation of the Nation". But it was this occasion, presided over by Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke that saw the beginning of the recent phenomena whereby young Australians bedeck themselves with Aussie flags and become patriotically drunk on iconic nationalistic occasions such as Australia Day and Anzac day.

The other phase occurred during the period of John Howard's Prime Ministership when two things happened. The first was when Mr. Howard attended the 90th anniversary of the ill-fated Gallipoli landing on Anzac Day in 2005 and declared that the Anzac legend had helped Australians define who they were. He said, "Anzac Day is a chance to reflect with pride on what it means to be Australian and the values we hold dear: determination, courage, compassion and resourcefulness."

Howard had also presided over what became known as the "history wars" back home during his Prime Ministership. This was an unsavoury episode of Australian history that is of particular importance to Aboriginal people because it involves the 'whitewashing' and 'airbrushing' of the history of Australia. Professor Geoffrey Blainey had in 1993 coined the phrase "Black armband view of history". That phrase began to be used, pejoratively or otherwise, by some Australian social scientists, commentators and especially Prime Minister Howard about historians whom they viewed as having presented an overly critical portrayal of Australian history since European settlement.

Implicit in Howard's use of the term "Black armband view of history" was a sense of denial about the true nature of the frontier conflict. That sense of denial was amplified during the "history wars" by a small group of conservative academics, most notably Keith Windshuttle, who became a national celebrity in a nation seeking to

continue its long tradition of denial about its treatment of Aboriginal people. Windshuttle was controversially appointed to the Board of the ABC by the Howard Government, which was seen as an endorsement of his views on the part of Prime Minister Howard.

The politicisation of our national memorialisation of Anzac Day is further evident when we have a former Howard government Minister, Brendan Nelson, who is now the Director of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, and former South Australian premier, Mike Rann, visiting Gallipoli as a Commonwealth war graves commissioner. With so many former politicians infesting the memorialisation landscape it is little wonder that politics dominates discussion about what exactly we should be remembering and commemorating.

Brendan Nelson's contribution to the debate has so far consisted of claiming that that formal memory doesn't extend to internal wars. In other words Nelson claims that colonial conflict does not constitute what he and the War Memorial consider a 'war'. But, ironically Nelson and the War Memorial are much better disposed to the acknowledgement of Aboriginal involvement in the wars conducted by the Australian nation, even when some of those battles such as Gallipoli campaign were more about fighting on behalf of Britain rather than Australia. This attitude reflects a broader national discomfort with the idea that Aboriginal warriors in the colonial era were fighting a 'war' against an invading force.

However, prominent historian Henry Reynolds asserts that "If there was no war, then thousands of Aborigines were murdered in a century-long , continent-wide crime wave tolerated by government. There seems to be no other option. It must be one or the other."

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Published Anzac Day - 25th April 2014
Melbourne Age - Sydney Morning Herald - Canberra Times