

How the old guard have hijacked the history wars

Greg Barns
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It's deuce in this "great debate" but the match is becoming very boring.

When Melbourne University history department colleagues Geoffrey Blainey and Stuart Macintyre first locked horns in the late 1980s, in response to the former's controversial views on Asian immigration, it marked the beginning of a decade-and-a-half-long cultural slanging match that seems to have more to do with present government policy and personal feuds than with serious scholarship.

The launch by Paul Keating last week of Professor Macintyre's book, *The History Wars*, is further confirmation of how political history has become in Australia.

This politicisation - which suits the media and publishers' thirst for conflict - is preventing new voices and lessons from our past emerging.

Paul Keating, Don Watson, Robert Manne, Henry Reynolds and Stuart Macintyre are on one side of the tennis court, and Keith Windschuttle, Geoffrey Blainey, Peter Ryan, David Flint and John Howard on the other. And, as is the case in tennis, while watching veterans play can sometimes be delightful, unfortunately on this occasion the debate seems to have all the appeal of an interminable base-line rally.

Australia's history "veterans" are getting personal in the presentation of their arguments.

Last Saturday, for example, in *The Weekend Australian*, Peter Ryan, former publisher of Melbourne University Press and a regular contributor to the conservative magazine *Quadrant*, reviewed *The History Wars*. Ryan chose to spend one long paragraph taking issue with the extent to which Dymphna Clark, historian Manning Clark's wife, showed Ryan "hospitality" - hospitality for which, Macintyre says in the book, Ryan was ungrateful. Ryan thundered that it wasn't hospitality, but merely "one scratched lunch". So what, you might ask?

Why is this debate so fierce, so ad hominem and so repetitive? Because control of the high-ground Australian culture allows, at least in some respects, for control of government policy.

John Howard, like Paul Keating, is a political leader who understands the importance of controlling key cultural institutions such as the ABC and the National Museum of Australia. Institutions such as these communicate to millions of Australians about our past, which in turn influences how people think about the present and the future.

Take the issue of white Australia's treatment of its indigenous brothers and sisters. Essential to Keating's commitment to what might be termed spiritual and historical reconciliation was the fact that, as he and his speechwriter Don Watson said in 1992, "white Australia committed the murders . . . took the children from their mothers . . . practised discrimination and exclusion".

On the other hand, Howard and some of his historical cheer leaders such as Blainey, Windschuttle and the anthropologist Ron Brunton, have been determined to undermine the Keating-Watson case by casting doubt on the extent of the injustices meted out to black Australia since 1788. For Howard, it is important to assert this because it bolsters his argument that a national apology and compensation for the suffering of the "stolen generation" is much less important for indigenous Australia than contemporary material success.

And equally crucial for Howard is that the ABC, and the National Museum, be seen to be telling a story about our past that is more consistent with his view of the world than not. The latter has been subjected to a review dealing with its treatment of Aboriginal history, and has both John Howard's former speechwriter and his biographer on its board, while the ABC now has Ron Brunton on its board.

Both Keating and Howard understand that how you present the past is the key to how you deal with the future, and they have used the arguments of historians and commentators such as Manne and Flint in their quest. One example will suffice.

For Blainey, the author of the label "black armband" to describe commentary that focuses on the injustices in our history, and for Flint, the leader of the Australian monarchists, the Australian story is one of success and stability. Howard builds on to this an argument against an Australian republic.

But for Watson and those in his camp, the treatment by the British of Australian troops in the Second World War, for example, bolsters the argument for Australia ridding itself of the last symbols of its colonial heritage.

Australia's understanding of its past should not be left to a handful of well-established historians and commentators to whom politicians turn for their predictable reassurances. The media and publishers have a responsibility to seek out new and younger voices - voices that have not sided with either Keating or Howard. Voices that, for example, focus on the undeniable fact of dispossession of black Australia by whites, and know that arguing about the number of indigenous people killed is much less important than using that history to inform our understanding of what genuine equality between our various indigenous and ethnic strands entails.

It's time for the 15-year history war to come to an end.

Greg Barns, a former head of the Australian Republican Movement and adviser to the Howard Government, is now a member of the Australian Democrats.