

Sorry, we require a synthesis

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The Weekend Australian

1-2 December 2007

Kevin Rudd's commitment to an indigenous apology early in the parliamentary term – the opening of parliament in the new year is the most symbolically likely occasion for it – draws the new PM and the Labor government immediately back to ground zero of the Australian history and culture wars of the past decade and a half.

The Liberal partyroom's decision to opt for Brendan Nelson ahead of Malcolm Turnbull's publicly canvassed candidature, which included support for an apology, turned on this very issue. It is clear the conservatives will use the apology as a point of difference between themselves and Rudd's Labor. While Work Choices drove Howard's battlers back to Labor, the working men who voted with silent resolve to throw the Coalition out of office are precisely the constituency who are susceptible to the following reaction to the apology: "Not in my name." They will cast an apology as a derogation from the national pride that Howard had so assiduously proclaimed during his ascendancy.

Rudd is now faced with three choices:

- He can deal with the apology in accordance with the cultural Left's desire to reassert the Left's position in the culture wars.
- He can choose to just manage and dispose of the issue as efficiently as possible.
- He can grapple with the deep issues of reconciliation and try to move beyond the polarity of the culture wars.

In terms of his political strategy for re-election and his track record going back to his time as head of the cabinet office under then Queensland premier Wayne Goss, there is no way that Rudd will want to take up the leftist cultural war against the Right. In his victory speech, Rudd was at pains to note that "(John Howard and I) share a common pride in this great nation of ours, Australia".

Rudd's record included a similar controversy over key words concerning Australia's colonial history and the story of Aborigines in this history. The hot-button word for Goss and Rudd was invasion, just as the hot button for Howard and now Rudd is sorry.

In February 1994, a furore erupted in Queensland because a new primary school sourcebook for social studies (which included history) attempted to break with the Eurocentric description of Australian history.

The education department's draft book was easy to attack for the political Right because it clumsily categorised terms into "not acceptable" and "preferred" categories. Unacceptable were terms such as pioneer, discover, explorer and settlement. Instead the sourcebook recommended invasion.

In the ensuing debate, historians such as Henry Reynolds argued that terms from both categories are needed to describe different aspects of Australian history after 1788. Reynolds said: "I think it was an invasion ... I also believe Australia was settled as well."

However, in the debate many people wanted to preserve the traditional terminology. Queensland Liberal politician Bob Quinn said: "White people came out here and settled, and that is it."

Goss reacted strongly against the new educational material. In some of his statements he went quite far in accommodating the opinion that flatly rejected a problematisation (to use the postmodernist term) of Australian history. Goss declared that "just about all Australians would not regard what happened in 1788 as an invasion", and he ordered a rewrite of the educational material.

The Queensland government's reaction disappointed indigenous people who had been working for recognition of indigenous Australians' perspectives on history. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Consultative Committee chairman Boni Robertson asked: "How can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples trust the government if it continually vetoes any attempt to share Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives with all Australians?"

According to academic Ray Land, who edited a book describing this Queensland curriculum conflict, the office of cabinet under Rudd's leadership was responsible for producing new guidelines for teachers to replace the version scrapped through Goss's intervention.

The new guidelines took, as Land noted, "a more discursive and subtle approach". The guidelines acknowledged that "many Aborigines ... interpret the arrival of the First Fleet and the subsequent spread of European settlement as an invasion' and they added that many non-indigenous people agree.

But in a key sentence, the replacement guidelines do not seem to encourage a synthesis of different perspectives; rather, they seem to suggest that the retention of a traditional Eurocentric perspective was a legitimate choice: "Others argue that the terms colonisation, non-indigenous occupation or settlement accurately describe the same events and actions."

The Goss and Rudd approach from 1994 is indistinguishable from the position taken by Howard during the course of his prime ministership. If we take views on Aboriginal history as spanning a spectrum from Keith Windschuttle on the Right to Reynolds or Robert Manne on the Left, then the 1994 episode in Queensland saw Rudd and Goss positioned down towards the Right end of the spectrum.

If Rudd plainly will not take up the cultural Left's war against the Right, then he is left with two choices: manage and dispose of the issue as efficiently as possible, or seek a more profound resolution to the question that answers the needs of the nation.

The problem with just managing the issue is that Labor and the Left have made much of Howard's refusal to apologise – they have used it as a cultural bludgeon – and there will be extreme sensitivity to the manner in which Rudd chooses to deliver the apology. Already Lowitja O'Donoghue has made clear that there is no room for compromise. There is only one word she wants to hear when the prime minister-elect makes the promised apology: "Don't use apology. We want sorry."

For those trying to manage this issue, Labor will be trying to find a way to avoid being politically hoist by its own cultural petard. For as febrile as many black Australians are about this issue, they are well matched by numerous whites.

Rudd is not Paul Keating and he will not take up cultural cudgels against the Right; rather, he will attempt to transcend or simply stay out of these fights. Rudd will prosecute a political strategy that will seek to avoid the polarity of the culture wars. He expressed his hopes on election night as follows: "I want to put aside the old battles of the past, the old battles between business and unions, the old battles between growth and the environment, the old and tired battles between federal and state, the old battles between public and private."

There are two ways of staying above the polarities of the culture wars. First, you can pretend that the fundamental positions on either side of the war are just ideological and on that basis you can construct a pragmatic and reasonable balance that works for you politically. As an omniscient manager of the nation's conflicts, you assume the role of confecting a balance.

The other way of transcending the polarities is to forge a new synthesis. A synthesis does not necessarily represent a simple balance. Rather, a synthesis takes account of anything that is compelling on either side of a conflict.

Reconciliation requires a synthesis that takes into account some of the valid objections raised by the Right in relation to how Australians might apprehend a common history, but which is not obscurantist about the breaking of the great Australian silence on Aboriginal history that prevailed for the first 150 years of the nation's existence.

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