

# THE HISTORY WARS IN AN AGE OF IDENTITY POLITICS

Getting the history of 'racism' in Australia right is in the national interest in the age of identity politics, argues **Jeremy Sammut**

## The national story and the national interest

**D**espite what the postmodern theorists claim, the nation remains the ultimate political reality. The power of the national story to inspire our collective beliefs about ourselves as Australians, and for those beliefs to inspire the direction of our national life, is the reason the history wars matter.

The history wars—the ongoing debate about the practice and teaching of Australian history, and about vitally important and potentially divisive subjects such as the history of Australian racism—remain a critically important battle of ideas. Understanding the true meaning of Australian history, and debunking the perennial claims routinely made about the role our supposedly perpetual history of 'racism' allegedly continues to play in Australian society, is increasingly in the national interest today. In the current age of grievance-mongering identity politics, the use, abuse and distortion of Australian history lies behind the politicisation of racial issues by organisations such as the Australian Human Rights Commission. Getting the history of Australian racism right has therefore never mattered more than now to counteract the threat identity politics poses to the social harmony that has become the hallmark of modern multi-racial Australia.

## History as agitprop

Although I have a doctorate in Australian history, I must confess to a gap in my formal education. I did not complete the first-year undergraduate Australian history course; I withdrew after the lecturer announced the first seven weeks would exclusively cover women in convict society. I didn't know much

when I was 18, but I knew I didn't want to spend seven weeks focusing solely on convict women. I didn't know it then either, but this was the start of my intellectual journey at a tangent to the—once radical but now orthodox—school of social history that has dominated academic Australian history since the 1970s.

The focus of this school—of this kind of history—was on specific social issues; mainly race and gender, at specific periods of time. This was underpinned by a political agenda—what we now call identity politics—which the New Left practitioners of the new social history approach were anything but shy about declaring as the motivating force for the kind of history they were writing 'from below'.

My problem with the social history orthodoxy is not with enquiry into topics such as gender and race per se; nor with acknowledging the discreditable aspects of Australian history that rightly prompt feelings of shame, if not the literal wearing of black armbands. The problem with the social history orthodoxy is that it ahistorically re-writes modern political preoccupations into the past, thereby distorting history for current political purposes. By this method, history is turned into propaganda, into agitprop,



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to create a politicised narrative about the nation, claim the high moral ground in social debates, and advance a policy agenda.

My real concern about the history wars is not only about promoting historical accuracy and correcting distortions of the past. Even more important considerations pertain to distortions of the present that twist our understanding of what kind of country Australia is today. These concerns apply to the orthodox histories of Australian racism, and to the potentially divisive and socially damaging kind of identity politics they encourage.

### **A timelessly racist country?**

The history of Australian racism has been my abiding preoccupation—both as a historian concerned about getting the national story right, and also as a think tanker concerned about the political and policy implications of how we understand our national story in relation to issues such as free speech and Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act.<sup>1</sup>

I was an undergraduate in the first half of the 1990s when the history wars were at their height under the Keating government. What lay behind what was then called the ‘national identity’ (rather than identity politics) debate was the view that Australia was a racist country, based on its racist history, for which it had to make up for by—among other things—becoming a republic, embracing ‘hard’ multiculturalism,<sup>2</sup> and through reconciliation with Indigenous Australians.

The national identity debate injected the new orthodoxy directly into national politics by challenging the so-called dominant discourse and alleged myths about the nation’s history of egalitarianism and the fabled ‘fair go’ for all—not by distorting the past so much as by distorting the present.

The orthodox histories of Australian racism were not solely focused on setting the record straight about the undoubted and often hitherto under-acknowledged racist aspects of our past. By focusing on the formation of the White Australia Policy, or on goldfield violence against the Chinese, or on frontier conflict, these events were not treated as artefacts of times past, but as living legacies that identified the ‘dark underbelly’ of racism pervading modern Australian society.

Through these instances of racism, high school and university students exposed to this ‘slice approach’ to history were taught about the history of Australian racism by citing examples of Australians being nasty—and worse—to other races.

Note that here I am repeating the standard criticism of the orthodox school, particularly as it is taught in school curriculums. The major criticism is that this is history in the most limited sense of the word, because it lacks genuine historical context. What is missing is an overarching narrative that explains, not the continuity of Australian attitudes to race—which is ahistorically assumed—but the great changes that have occurred in Australian society since the days of goldfields, the frontier, and the White Australia Policy.

Instead, played out through the orthodoxy are present-day political preoccupations, via history as propaganda and agitprop, to promote contemporary political causes, including—under Keating in the 1990s—the insertion of Section 18C in the Racial Discrimination Act.

As an Australian from a family with an ethnic background, I found the stock standard Left progressive account of Australia as an inherently and timelessly racist country very puzzling. It certainly did not tally with my, or my family’s, experience in this country—which like many people from migrant backgrounds has been one, on the whole, of tolerance, acceptance and opportunity regardless of race.

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### **The past is *not* the present**

As an historian, I set out to unravel the seeming puzzle of how racist white Australia became tolerant modern Australia, and why so many academic historians did not think this was so.

Hence one of my early articles (‘The Long Demise of the White Australia Policy’, *Quadrant*, November 2005) explained the process by which the legacy of the White Australia Policy was gradually

overcome after World War II, and how Australia has been transformed into probably the world's most successful multi-racial nation; principally by means of extending the 'fair go' ethos on a colour-blind basis to all comers regardless of origins.

This history I outlined in the article has directly informed my think tank work on freedom of speech. It has shaped my argument that it is the national culture of tolerance and acceptance that has developed under the 'fair go' ethos—not so-called hate speech laws such as Section 18C and institutions like the Australian Human Rights Commission—that explain Australia's success as an 'immigrant nation'.

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This understanding of our history has also informed my criticism of the role the Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner, Tim Soutphommasane, is playing in contemporary debates about race and racism. This includes Soutphommasane's interventions into the free speech debate, where he has argued that Section 18C should be retained to keep the 'dark underbelly' of Australian racism in check.

But even more concerning is Soutphommasane's assertion that structural solutions are needed to address the so-called problem of structural racism, through racial quotas in Australian business to increase the number of Asian CEOs and board members. This kind of affirmative action proposal goes completely against the grain of how we have achieved our multi-racial success story—which is by overlooking racial and other differences and finding commonalities, not by institutionalising difference, let alone by politicising it.

The Race Discrimination Commissioner has even used the inflammatory term 'professional coolies' to describe alleged attitudes towards high-achieving Asian graduates in high-paying industries such as finance. The reason Soutphommasane's grievance-mongering worries me is that his ideas are being cast before a receptive audience.

The orthodoxy has largely won the battle of ideas within academia, which is one of the reasons we live in an age of full-blown identity politics. We have at least one generation of university-educated people who have been politicised, and are deeply invested in the identity politics notion that certain groups are perpetual victims of sexism, racism and homophobia at the hand of the dominant culture.

This is despite the enormous social changes of recent decades, which, by any objective measure, make a nonsense of this claim. For despite what the orthodoxy insists, the past is not the present: we no longer think a woman's place is in the home, any more than we think of Asians as coolies—professional or otherwise.

### History fit for nation-building

The identity warriors should be careful what they wish for. I fear—and not without good reason, based on Trump, Brexit, and the revival of One Nation locally—that identity politics could prove a disastrously self-fulfilling prophecy. If so-called 'white privileged' Australians have their equality of opportunity denied, along with their fundamental rights such as free speech curtailed, in the name of promoting diversity, I fear that identity politics is a recipe for racialised politics and social divisions—a nightmare scenario that should be avoided at all costs in the national interest.

Hence I remain—and never more so than right now—focused on the big picture of our history; and what a wonderful national story there is to tell about the history of Australian racism. Over the past 70 years, we have achieved what the federal fathers—who were staunch supporters of the White Australia Policy almost to a man—thought was impossible. They believed other races had to be barred from the new nation because a multi-racial country would inevitably lead to racial strife. That ordinary Australians, through the collective commitment to the principle of the 'fair go' regardless of race, have proven the founders of the nation wrong is, in my opinion, our greatest national achievement and demonstration of our national character at its finest.

This is the kind of nation-building history that should to be learned by Australians to avoid politicising race and ensure continued social harmony. Ensuring all Australians know the

Australian dream of a fair go and opportunity for all—enjoyed by migrants and non-migrants alike—is not a myth but reality, will also help sustain popular support for a large, legal, non-discriminatory immigration program in the national interest. And this true and meaningful account of the national story will also, most importantly of all, continue to promote the acceptance and successful integration of new Australians by upholding the tolerant social

attitudes essential to make a multi-racial society function freely and fairly.

### Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, my article in the Autumn 2015 issue of *Policy*, 'As Australian as the Fair Go', <https://www.cis.org.au/app/uploads/2015/07/31-1-sammut-jeremy.pdf>
- 2 For a recent discussion of 'hard' versus 'soft' multiculturalism, see Peter Kurti, 'The Fetish of Diversity', *Policy* 33:3 (Spring 2017), 45-51.

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