

**THE LAUNCH OF
THE HISTORY WARS
P J Keating
Melbourne
3 September 2003**

The so-called History Wars arose as conservative Australia under the Prime Ministership of John Howard militantly reacted to and resisted the philosophies and policies of Paul Keating and his Labor Government. Eschewing the notions of inclusion, multiculturalism, a genuine reconciliation, a republic and an integral place for Australia in Asia, conservative history warriors sought to supplant the Keating edifice. In this extemporaneous address Paul Keating extols the writing of *The History Wars* with its interpretive value while taking the conservative establishment to task.

The writing of *The History Wars* is very important. The book will sit on the shelves of libraries as a sort of code stone to help people understand the motivations of players in today's contemporary debate. It sheds light on the political battle which is carried on in the pubs and on the footpaths about who we are and what has become of us. For the protagonists and antagonists in academe are now surrogates in a broader political battle about Australia's future.

We should reflect on this: alone, among the peoples of the world, we have possession of a continent, a continent we laid claim to as part of an empire, one we expropriated from another race, but a continent that is no longer an island in a sea of subjugated and colonial places. The Dutch no longer control Indonesia, the French no longer Indo-China. And the Chinese: well, they now run China for themselves.

We occupy a continent surrounded by ancient societies; nations which have reclaimed their identity and their independence.

The Australian story, for it to be a record of continuing success, must come to terms with our expropriation of the land, our ambivalence as to who we are and our place in the new geopolitical make-up of the region. That is, being part of it, rather than simply being tolerated within it.

History is always our most useful tool and guide. Understanding our past helps us to divine our future.

To see the long strands which denote our character and which have been common in each epoch of our development. And how they might be adapted in our transformation as an integral part of this region, while, at the same time, re-energising our national life.

How do we pick the good strands and the step changes we need to make on the pathway to our security?

Because there are only twenty million of us, the primary matter in our national policy is how we maintain possession of the continent. How we find the pathway to a genuine security, and a naturally reinforcing one. Our security in Asia rather from Asia. Where we are other than a client state perennially searching for a strategic guarantor.

Once, all our faith was in the British Navy. Now it has swung to the American defence establishment.

Those who militantly defend the conservative orthodoxy in Australia see all change as an affront to the past, especially their view of the past. Whereas, knowing the past and seeing it for what it is, with all its blemishes, allows us to divine a destiny, for our appointment with reality.

And our appointment with reality is coming around. We are no longer part of some empire. No longer a passenger on the British Lion. No longer protected by their navy, that is, to the extent that we ever were.

While people may say we enjoy protection by the Americans, we have to be clear what this really means.

I have never understood why the Howards and the Blainey are so defensive. So resistant to novelty and to progress. They are more than conservatives—they are reactionaries.

Conservatives gradually, if somewhat reluctantly, accommodate themselves to change. Reactionaries not only resist change, they seek to reverse it. Understanding and acknowledging the past and moving on to bigger and better things is anathema to them.

They absolutely insist on their view and the lessons they see in our history. Yet in their insistence, their 'proprietaryness', their 'derivativeness' and in their rancour, they reduce the flame and energy within the nation to a smouldering incandescence. What they effectively do is crimp and cripple our destiny. Like suffering some sort of anaemia, robbing the political blood of its energy.

The problem for the Howards and the Blainey is that their story is simply not big enough for Australia.

No great transformation can come from their tiny view of us and their limited faith in us.

Their failure is not simply one of crabbiness; it's a failure of imagination, a failure to read our historical coordinates correctly while moving to a bigger construct, a bigger picture as to who we are and what we might become. That's the real job of political leadership.

Their timidity not only diminishes their own horizon, it is a drag on the rest of us. The country always has to make its progress despite them. Always they have to be dragged along and they will only accept a new norm after someone else has struggled to put it into place.

But the fact is, their view will not prevail. They cannot win because they have no policy framework to win with. And deep in their tiny, timorous hearts they know it.

The undertaking is simply too big for them.

This is why you get all this thrashing about in the press and why we are drenched in the babble of the lickspittles and tintookies who support them. And it's just that: babble. It's babble because at the heart of their wrong-headed campaign is an attempt to contain and censor the human spirit; to muffle, muzzle and vitiate it.

Their exclusiveness, whether we are talking about White Australia in the past or boat people now, relies on constructing arbitrary and parochial distinctions between the civic and the human community. Who is in and who is out. Who is owed possession. Who has rights.

If you ask what is the common policy between the Le Pens, the Terre'Blanches, Hansons and the Howards of this world, in a word, it is 'citizenship'. And it has always been. Who is in and who is out. Who is approved of.

Wolfgang Kasper, writing in Quadrant, was brazen enough to instruct us in the 'frictional costs of Australian settlement of Muslims'. An example of the new fascism.

Rather than celebrate the successful multiculturalisation of Australia, they seek to shear people off playing on old prejudices by the use of implicitly negative phrases like 'for all of us', when they really mean 'for some of us'. This is a government that talks in code.

John Howard does not understand that base motivations of these kinds run through a community and a polity like a virus, that these things are poison to a nation's soul. They are part of an anti-enlightenment. John Howard has recalibrated Australia's moral compass, where due north is only for elites, whoever they might be.

A national leader, I think, should always be searching for the threads of gold in a community. Nurturing and bringing them out. Focusing on the best instincts—running with the human spirit and not punishing it.

A growing public morality and probity based on notions of charity and human regard should not be traduced by slurs such as 'political correctness', with implicit support for an official 'incorrectness'. It takes a long time to build institutions and to build new norms of behaviour, new acceptances of protocols in any country. But to build them and then have them traduced is a terrible thing.

Those who want to celebrate only our European past, rejoicing in its prejudices, who want us exclusive and cocooned and who employ division and ridicule, must lose.

Many people are dispirited by this period and they think the Bolts, McGuinnesses, the Devines and the Albrechtsens somehow have the upper hand. In my view they will simply be a smudge in history. What have they put into place which makes any heart skip a beat or which is enduring? Nothing. In the end, there will be no punctuation mark in our annals from their paltry efforts.

The game is too big for them.

This is why those of progressive mind shouldn't despair, arid as this period is. Because in the end, the vapid and heartless messages of the militant conservatives will fail to make headway.

Always confronting them will be these things. Who are we? Can we borrow the monarch of another country perpetually? Can we go to the region and say we've turned a new leaf but, by the way, we never got to a proper basis of reconciliation with our indigenes? How do we find our security in the region rather than from the region? How do we make our multiculturalism work better? How do we make everyone feel as though they belong, that the place, truly is, for all of us?

These questions remain on the agenda; unsatisfied perhaps and unattended. But still sitting there.

I notice people saying this debate hasn't harmed us in Asia. I don't know who they are talking to. The publicity people in foreign affairs departments around the region perhaps, certainly not those who actually run these countries.

The fact is, there are a lot of wise heads in this part of the world, those who see Australia in a longer context and who are waiting for us to recover our equilibrium.

The History Wars rolls out the canvas of this debate. It helps us better understand the battlefield. It provides us with some of the infrared we need to discern the shapes in the current darkness. We owe Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark for that.

It is with most respect that I launch *The History Wars* and wish it well in its journey to the library catalogues.