On 5 July 1996 Prime Minister John Howard delivered the Sir Thomas Playford Memorial Lecture at the Adelaide Town Hall. Howard informed his audience that the occasion gave him the opportunity to ‘set the historical record straight’ by exposing ‘one of the more insidious developments in Australian life over the past decade’, that being ‘the attempt to re-write Australian history in the service of a partisan political cause’. According to Howard, ordinary Australians were being ‘force-fed by those self appointed cultural dieticians in our midst whose agenda has more to do with divisive political strategies than the facts of history’. In claiming support for, and knowledge of, facts beyond any political motivation or ideology, Howard adopted the pose of the historian as neutral arbiter, as scientist, who judges the past on the balance of evidence. But his call for a history of ‘facts’ and laying his claim to the objective high ground while pointing the accusing finger of bias and revisionism at others was a very poor attempt to camouflage his own political motivation.

In his discussions of Australia’s past Howard has made much use of the populist term ‘black armband history’. In it he has found yet another band-wagon to clamber aboard, having in past years ridden the anti-Asian, dole-bludger and economic rationalist band-wagons, without ever really jumping off any of them. ‘Black armband history’ is a phrase which suits populist and conservative intellectuals, and is often found lurking among statements referring to ‘political correctness’, the ‘guilt industry’ and the ‘Aboriginal industry’; all terms which Noel Pearson has referred to as ‘tabloid free speech ... carefully crafted to activate those hot buttons in our community’, hot buttons which John Howard has repeatedly exploited.

The current debate about history in Australia is important to the outcome of issues of so-called ‘native title’ and indigenous rights more generally. It is no
coincidence that the two are dominant issues in Australia at present. Howard fully realises that a more open and honest account of white Australia’s colonial past may also inhibit the ability of his Liberal-National government to roll back the (limited) recognition of indigenous land rights which resulted from the Australian High Court’s 1992 Mabo decision. In his response to both the issues of colonial history and land rights he has shown none of the character which Peter Yu of the Kimberly Land Council believes is necessary if the Australian nation is to progress on either issue. Yu writes that for a just solution in relation to issues of land to be reached, ‘the nation must fully address in a mature and rational manner the implications of the fact that Aboriginal law has been recognised in the law of Australia.’ So must white Australia also recognise the realities of its own past.

In his Playford lecture Howard outlined a manifesto to combat the ‘recent attempted hijacking of our history ... [which has] set Australian against Australian’. He spoke of the need for an ‘uplifting’, relaxed and comfortable Australian history project. Howard’s would be a unifying history; ‘the story of all our people ... for all our people ... broadly constituting a scale of heroic and unique achievement against great odds’. If I suspend belief for a moment this sounds like a wonderful history. A *History of Australian Heroes* would make a first-rate Ph.D. and an even better book, a rare achievement in itself. One can imagine reading this book on a winter’s night by the fire, feeling very relaxed and comfortable in a Jason Recliner rocker. To complete this idyllic scene we would only need to reduce the colour on the television set to late-1950s black and white, when the contrasts were more obvious.

Recent revisionists, according to Howard, have abused ‘the true purpose of history’ by reading it ‘backwards ... imposing on the past a pattern designed to serve contemporary political needs’, whereas a history ‘for all of us’, would attempt to ‘understand the past on its own terms and not judge those who have gone before us’. Raimond Gaita has written that ‘the words “for all of us” ... implied that Aborigines, ethnic minorities and recent immigrants had deprived the rest of “us” of our fair share of goods and opportunities.’ So it is for history as it is for the ‘special treatment’ enjoyed by these ‘minorities’. If John Howard is to be believed his mainstream Australia has been deprived of its history, although any Anzac Day parade, Australia Day celebration, a walk through Melbourne’s imperially-inscribed parks or even a breakfast cereal commercial might lead us to think otherwise, (notwithstanding that these are histories of nationalist cliché).

What Howard opposes is the concept of *histories*, be they oppositional or pluralist. A history ‘for all of us’ is one history for one Australia. It is a history of exclusion which would deny the right to claim and remember the past in a particular way for many groups within Australian society. I am not only thinking about identified minority groups here. The Jason Recliner genre would be less comfortable for others also. Howard’s relaxed and comfortable history would exclude those whose lives have not been so comfortable, unless of course they were produced with an ‘uplifting’ ending in which the individual and heroic battler triumphs above adversity; the Pauline Hanson story, perhaps?
In the Playford lecture Howard did not refer to Aboriginal people at all. But as is one of his skills the message was encoded in much that was said. When he accused the ‘cultural dieticians’ of ‘reopening some divisions in our society that most of us rightly believed had been reconciled long ago’, there is no doubt that he was referring to histories which addressed issues of the attempted dispossession of Aboriginal people. He was more explicit on this point on the John Laws radio program later in 1996 when discussing the teaching of history in schools. Howard stated that to inform Australian children about the past mistreatment of Aboriginal people, and to teach them that ‘we’re all part of it, we’re part of a sort of racist and bigoted history’, was something that he ‘rejected’.5

He expanded on this point in a ‘candid’ and ‘exclusive’ interview given to the tabloid Who Weekly in December, 1996, where he appeared alongside other notable celebrities such as Paula Yates, Rose Hancock Porteous, Tiger Woods and Gillian Anderson. Howard repeated his attack on the ‘elites’ of Australian society, who he claimed controlled historical and political debate at the expense of ‘ordinary Australians’. He also expanded on his views of white Australia’s past in his comment that ‘although we did treat Aborigines appallingly ... I’m not one of those who say whenever there is criticism made of Australia or Australian history we should roll over in grovelling apology to the rest of the world’.6 Importantly, in the same interview, where Howard discussed his views of ‘the Independent member for Oxley’, Pauline Hanson, he displayed an ability to distance himself from her comments, to a strategically limited degree, while at the same time stroking the innate bigotry of her remarks.

In responding to the statement that many Australians would agree with Hanson’s view of the link between immigration and unemployment, Howard said that ‘if you’re a blue collar worker or living in a regional centre of Australia and you’ve lost your job, and you don’t have any prospect of getting another one, you will naturally think “Well, if you stop immigration I might get my job back”’. Of course it may appear natural for blue collar workers (or retired university professors for that matter) to think such a thing, particularly if they were influenced by John Howard’s 1988 anti-immigration stance, a personal and political history that he has forgotten with such ease.

And while people are thinking that they do not have a job because it has apparently been taken by a Vietnamese refugee who arrived here starving and homeless as a child, or as a result of the ‘privileges’ given to an Aboriginal worker paid $150 per week to work for the dole, they certainly will not question the insensitivity of the economic rationalist policies of the past Labor and present Coalition governments. As with many other issues Howard provides no moral leadership when ‘extreme’ views are aired. Internationally he has shown some limited concerns, particularly when the word ‘trade’ is mentioned, but domestically he stands by to watch the numbers fall.

This position was aptly described by Michael Gawenda of the Age in October 1996 when he wrote that ‘while John Howard does not share Hanson’s views’ (an arguable point):
he nevertheless has more empathy for those people who share them than for those who strongly reject them. While he has been absolutely determined not to directly tackle the Hanson agenda, he has, more than once, made it clear that he understands why she has a following.  

After the publication of the Who Weekly interview Aboriginal magistrate Pat O’Shane articulated the views of many indigenous people with the more direct statement that Howard was a ‘hypocrite and a coward ... hiding behind Hanson’s tapping into not just Australians’ fears but in fact racism and other base attitudes ... his motives are extremely dubious, indeed I would say deceitful’.  

Howard also stated in the Who Weekly interview that he understood why ‘there is very, very deep resentment in Australia’ towards Aboriginal people; ‘most Australians’, he claimed, ‘want to help Aborigines, but they get very angry when they see money wasted’. This issue of waste is not one that Aboriginal people shy away from. In fact in recent years it has been grass-roots Aboriginal communities which have campaigned most vigorously to end bureaucratic mismanagement. In Raimond Gaita’s discussion of the relationship between Howard and the New Right the point is made that a truly mature commitment to a genuine process of reconciliation, which would require some humility on the part of people such as Howard, would not ‘deprive one of the right to criticise ... for example, corruption in the administration of Aboriginal services’. The point is, from my perspective, that Howard does not at present have the moral authority to comment on such issues. He uses the issue of ‘Aboriginal waste’ as a convenient generalisation to taint all Aboriginal people. A similar position would never be canvassed in regard to white Australia. If Alan Bond and Christopher Skase are criminals, does anyone suggest white Australia as a whole is criminal?  

The present hollowness of the debate surrounding colonial history was evident in the controversies which followed the High Court’s 1992 Mabo decision. Those who would reject the language of Pauline Hanson and dismiss her as uneducated ‘poor white trash’ should read her maiden speech, which criticises Aboriginal ‘industries’, ‘multiculturalists’, and ‘do-gooders’, and then compare them to any of the anti-Aboriginal speeches made by another ‘black armband view’ opponent, Professor Geoffrey Blainey, who has paraded himself as the objective historian of the post-Mabo debate.  

During the initial Mabo debate Blainey not only showed that he shares Hanson’s current ‘wake up Australia’ xenophobia, in claiming that ‘one big Aboriginal area has the rainfall to sustain many millions of people of East Asian standards of living’, he supported the ‘migratory conquest’ view of history in his acceptance of the repeated and on-going attempts to dispossess Aboriginal people as a natural process of evolution. According to Blainey, Aboriginal societies were ‘bound to be overthrown or undermined’ as a result of a wasteful and “extravagant” use of space. Despite anthropologist Gillian Cowlinshaw writing that such statements ‘appear ludicrous from a scholarly perspective’, Blainey’s views continued to receive attention, beyond their ability to attract headlines, with the Age newspaper in particular utilising Blainey as their ‘expert’ on Australian history in recent years.
Some would claim that as a self-titled ‘eminent Australian historian’ Blainey has something to offer a debate on race relations in Australia. But as an historian who utilised the crudest form of empiricism in 1993 when he stated that the ‘average Aborigine ... has about 12 times as much land as the average non-Aborigine’ he displays a level of intellect which on the surface would appear to stoop to that of Pauline Hanson. If first year history students presented such an argument we would be expected to fail them.

Blainey should not be such a soft target. He is clearly an intelligent person. Even those who have criticised him in the past, particularly over his stance against Asian immigration, point to his vast scholarship in Australian history. But in recent times he has written some very bad history. I do not mean ‘politically incorrect’ history, but populist sloganeering which does not stand up to scrutiny. While some of his critics claim that such views result from being a paid spokesperson of the mining industry, I believe that Blainey’s stance is indicative of a deep-seated anxiety which underlies his position. He may be paid to speak on behalf of vested interests, but he also exemplifies the psychological condition of those who cannot come to terms with their own history, let alone an Aboriginal one.

When Blainey wrote in 1993 that ‘the future for Aborigines is as Australians not Aborigines’ he was reiterating the views of his 1975 The Triumph of the Nomads, intuitively sub-titled A History of Ancient Australia. I have no wish to denigrate the work, which for its time was arguably ‘ground-breaking’. The text is important for the insight that it gives of the colonial psyche. The book concludes as an imperial tragedy, a melancholic lament for the ‘passing of the Aborigine’. Blainey writes in the final chapter ‘Sails of Doom’ that:

> People who could not boil water were confronted by the nation which had recently contrived the steam engine’. As a result of this ‘progress’ the arrival of ‘the white sails of the English ships ... [extinguished] the flames of countless camp-fires, covering with drift-sand the grinding-stones and fishing nets, silencing the sounds of hundreds of languages, and stripping the ancient aboriginal [sic] names from nearly every valley and headland.’

This is a narrative of extinction, an ending. Blainey has shown in recent years that he is unable to countenance the reality of a contemporary Aboriginal community with cultural, historical and legal rights embedded in the same past that he both mourns and celebrates.

A similar view of Australia’s past can be found in the commentaries of Colin Howard, a lawyer who has strongly opposed the High Court’s Mabo decision and ridiculed ‘the black armband brigade’. It is not for me to criticise legitimate and vigorous legal debate. Lawyers get paid good money to do this. What I would oppose though is the manner in which Howard, among others, used the Mabo issue to denigrate Aboriginal history and culture. Writing for the right-wing Institute of Public Affairs, Howard stated that the concept of terra nullius ‘was a statement not of fact but of law’. Such a view avoids the ridiculous literal notion and mythology of an ‘empty land’ terra nullius, that when the British
invaded this land there were no people here at all. Howard though replaces it with a legal mythology of *terra nullius*, in that indigenous peoples were ‘in fact’ here, but somewhat perversely, were legally and morally absent.

Having dealt with the legal concept of *terra nullius* Howard goes on to construct a contemporary social one in stating that the most important characteristic of Australia’s population ‘after two centuries is the presence of a mostly white, or at least non-Aboriginal *indigenous* population [my italics] which, as throughout history, has supplanted its predecessors, notwithstanding that the latter still survive as tiny and often fringe communities’. He expands on this triumphal view of history in claiming that ‘migratory conquest has been a recurrent fact of history which has only recently attracted moral criticism from anyone but the losers’. This ‘celebration of conquest’, the opposite of the ‘black armband mourning’ which John Howard claims would turn Australians into a nation of grovellers, is often articulated by those who realise that it is pointless to deny past colonial oppressions. But rather than pause to think of the immorality of oppression they beat their chests like school-yard bullies, ridiculing the so-called ‘losers’.

To further deny a need to address this past in either a legal or moral sense Colin Howard dismissively concludes that ‘the only certainty about the conquest of Australia is that it happened. Everyone associated with it has long since died. Nothing will ever right the wrongs done, unless one happens to believe in inherited guilt’. Putting aside for a moment his comment on guilt, Colin Howard’s history of conquest obviously ignores the post-Second World War abduction of Aboriginal children as the ‘final solution’ of the so-called Aboriginal problem. This and other acts of colonial violence committed against indigenous people are issues of the present, not the past.

Denials of inherited colonial guilt are often repeated in discussions of ‘black armband history’. John Howard stands for many others when he states that white Australia has no need to feel guilty about its past. A common indigenous view is that white guilt is useless to Aboriginal people anyway. So why then do we hear so many chant ‘not guilty’ when no one has asked them to plead? Noel Pearson believes that those who repeatedly deny this guilt ‘betray an anxiety to exorcise guilt’. This anxiety, I believe, often manifests itself in the type of racist hysteria which followed the indigenous name restoration project for the Gariwerd/Grampians National Park in 1991, and the colonial mythologies which are created in order to cope with denial and amnesia.

Although John Howard has repeatedly referred to ‘all of us’ as if we were welded together, the present focus in Australian society is on the individual. Judith Brett has made the important point that this ‘stress on individual effort and achievement often sits uneasily with a recognition of the debts that even the most independent of us have to others, not just in our immediate family but in the wider society in which we live’. She goes on to link the outcome of individualism with its ability to ‘minimise the connections between the present
and the past’ and to ‘minimise deep connections between people, particularly generations’. It was within such a climate, according to Brett, that the federal minister for Aboriginal Affairs, John Herron made the ‘crass suggestion that some Aboriginal children may have benefited from being taken away from their families’, a view totally ignorant of the historical outcomes in which people ‘deprived of parenting’ have had no opportunity to ‘learn to parent’; the same people who have been denied the basic human right ‘to know who they are’. In a similar response to such remarks County Court judge Peter Gebhardt recently commented that Herron was ‘a disgrace’, expressing ‘views straight out of our colonial past’. In light of such criticism Herron has continued to respond to issues such as the abduction of Aboriginal children throughout the twentieth century with cheap disrespectful rhetoric. In his dismissal of a Federal Opposition call for a bipartisan statement on issues of reconciliation Herron stated ‘we will not pander to trendy, politically correct teams of do-gooders living off the cause rather than for the cause’. (He followed this with the claim that he also opposed ‘jargon-loaded political rhetoric’).

Rather than accept responsibility for the racist policy of assimilation we get the insensitive comments of people such as John Herron. If the removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities is accepted as wrong at all it is often benignly referred to as ‘misguided’, with no historical recognition that post-war assimilationism developed from the pre-war labour camp practices of the states. I would ask anyone interested in the history of Aboriginal incarceration and child stealing to read the minutes of the 1937 joint Commonwealth and State conference into Aboriginal Welfare which provide an insight into the history of so-called assimilationism, a deceptive term at best.

At the 1937 conference, attended by the Chief Protectors of the states and Commonwealth, Aboriginal people were valued as a cheap labour commodity. The Commonwealth Chief Protector, Dr C. E. Cook, called for the ‘uplifting’ of Aboriginal communities, but to a very limited capacity. He stated that ‘if they can read, write, and count, and know what wages they should get ... that is all that should be necessary’. In order to control Aboriginal people so their labour could be fully ‘harnessed’, the 1937 conference unanimously endorsed the containment practices adopted by Western Australia. That state’s Chief Protector, A. O. Neville, boasted that he ‘had the power to take any native from one part of the state to any other part’. He was also able to remove any Aboriginal child from their family, with lighter-skinned children a favoured target: ‘children, two or three times removed from full blood have blue eyes, fair hair and other features, which, if they were mixing with white people, would make it difficult to distinguish them from people of full white blood’.

This brutality, which some refer to as ‘misplaced benevolence’, was carried out well into the 1960s, directly affecting Aboriginal people today. These wrongs did not occur two hundred years ago, and the responsibility for them should be accepted by Australian governments today. I could reproduce narratives here which give some indication of the terror experienced by Aboriginal families when their children were literally taken from their arms. I could expand on the fact that despite the statistic that ‘one in six’ Aboriginal children have been removed from their communities, every single Aboriginal family in Australia I
know has been affected by the institutionalisation of a family member. But to do so would only provide ammunition for those insensitive enough to regard this as an emotional ‘black armband’ polemic. And as any student of history would know the discipline does not tolerate too much emotion.

To again refer to the comments of Raimond Gaita, to acknowledge ‘the wrongs done by one’s political ancestors’ is not necessarily to engage in any ‘maudlin self-abasement that gives the ring of truth to talk of black armband brigades’. Gaita writes that an acceptance of the past, and a sense of collective shame about what happened, as opposed to guilt, would simply reflect the ‘moral reality’ of the situation. The opposite view ‘that Australia has little or nothing to be ashamed of’, and that ‘on balance’ white history ‘is a fine one’ is, according to Gaita, to accept the sheer ‘weightlessness of the evil done to Aborigines’.23

This weightlessness, and the forgetfulness that often accompanies it, places an unfair burden on Aboriginal people, who are subsequently forced to remember white Australia’s past for it. Aboriginal people must act as the conscience of a sector of white Australia unwilling to acknowledge its history. During the recent hearings of the federal inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal children from their families many witnesses gave distressing evidence relating to the removal of their children. Summaries of the hearings made reference to the ‘social problems’ which resulted from these removals. But, as is invariably the case, they were discussed as ‘Aboriginal problems’, as if they not only existed within, but emanated from, indigenous communities.

A remembrance of the child removals is an important aspect of Aboriginal history, as it commemorates the lives of many children who were lost to their communities. But this is also a shared history which Aboriginal people alone are required to remember and retell before the public on behalf of those who would prefer to forget an irrefutable truth which has been stated in simple, precise terms in the comments of the federal Aboriginal social justice commissioner, Michael Dodson, ‘this nation has stolen from parents and families and communities. It committed a grievous crime, a crime against humanity. The time has arrived to pay for that crime’.24 The history of ‘assimilation’ is one of bureaucratic deception; it is a history of the quack science of social Darwinism; it is a history of the dominant racial fear of white Australia in the first half of the twentieth century, the fear of miscegenation; it is a history of child abduction and abuse. Rather than repeatedly call upon Aboriginal people to relive the horrors of assimilation, we could have a version of South Africa’s truth commission, with the bureaucrats, politicians, police and social workers explaining the so-called misguided motivation behind their actions. If this seems unfair, is it more reasonable to expect Aboriginal people to relive this trauma in the knowledge that if they do not speak white Australia is unlikely to do so?

In his speech to the recent Aboriginal Reconciliation Council’s national conference John Howard showed through his disrespectful ‘hectoring’25 of the audience (in defending his ‘ten point’ Wik plan), that he is unable to provide the mature and thoughtful leadership required in this country at present. In fact his apparent small-mindedness has been referred to by one academic as a reflection of Howard’s physical and intellectual stature alike; ‘our Prime Minister now looks so puny, dwarfed by the historical demands of our time’.26
In Australia we live in a colonial society. Post-colonialism in this country is a job, a luxury enjoyed only by the academy. We have a colonialisn prime minister who does not have the capacity to accept indigenous people as autonomous self-determining communities, so the mythology must continue. But the time for myths must surely be over. The erasure of an Aboriginal history by a pioneering *terra nullius* narrative created a history erected on a foundation of quicksand. It is a history which cannot tolerate disturbance as it so easily collapses. In his 1996 Mannix Memorial lecture Patrick Dodson said that ‘the past shapes the kind of society we now have’.27 Those who cannot look at this past create a version of history which makes the present more comfortable. It should be now accepted that contemporary white Australia has benefited from the attempted dispossessions of Aboriginal people. *All* Australians have benefited from the exploitation of Aboriginal land and labour. As a result of such benefits, Dodson points out, is that ‘we now have to recognise that Aborigines have a moral claim on other Australians to redress past wrongs’. This must include a more honest assessment of that past.

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ENDNOTES

2*Australian*, 22 November 1996.
3Ibid., 22 January 1997.
4*Quadrant* January-February 1997, p. 46.
5*Age*, 8 November 1996.
7*Age*, 28 October 1996.
8Ibid., 16 December 1996.
9*Quadrant*, January-February 1997, p. 49.
10*Age*, 15 November 1996.
12Ibid., p. 51.
13Ibid., p. 51.
16*Australian*, 22 November 1996.
19*Age*, 8 November 1996.
20Ibid., 1 November 1996.
27*Age*, 28 October 1996.