

Chapter Eleven: A Black Arm-Band for Australia's 20th Century?

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Has the Commonwealth of Australia been more a story of success than of failure in its first century? Until at least the 1970s most Australian politicians, commentators, historians, political scientists, medical researchers and members of a host of other professions would have voted Australia as overall a success. The average Australian man and woman would have similarly voted 'Yes'. In the last twenty years or more the doubters have multiplied. Historians are prominent in the ranks of the doubters.

In my own judgment the nation's successes, in its first century as a federation, outweigh its failures by a large margin. Which successes and failures would I single out? Building on colonial achievements, the Commonwealth in its first years was an experimental pioneer of democracy. It was almost certainly the first nation in the world in which women possessed both the right to vote and to stand for Parliament. During its first century as a united nation Australia solved its internal disagreements and disputes by discussion and debate, and not by force. Measured by the modern and non-Athenian sense of the word "democracy", it was the world's first. This is a remarkable achievement when one considers that less than fifty years later a widely-acclaimed goal was to make the entire world "safe for democracy": what was an experiment was becoming a global axiom.

Along with New Zealand, Australia was a path-finder in the welfare state and the idea of caring for those who, largely through no fault of their own, could not care for themselves. Australia was therefore one of the first nations to learn how difficult it was to find the appropriate balance between offering what is now called a safety net, so vital in an urban society, and at the same time deterring people from using the net as a sleeping hammock. This is one of the reasons why Australia, by world standards, was more a success story in the material sense during the years 1850 to 1890 than in the most successful forty years of the 20th Century. Amongst other things, in those favoured years 1850-90 the goal of self-help was valued the more, and the incentives were also higher.

In a world increasingly mesmerised by spectator sport, Australia's relatively small population achieved a remarkable sporting record, though Finland at one time and New Zealand at another time would at least be comparable. On the other hand, some critics might say that Australia's laid-back work culture of the weekdays would have been more successful if it had imbibed some of the competitive attitude of the sports culture which presided over the weekends. Yet again, the attitude towards leisure would be seen by some as one of Australia's triumphs. In the eyes of many commentators, one of Australia's successes was to devise a partly-outdoor way of life that combined ample space, ample leisure and a favourable standard of living. Another success is that it is a courteous and convivial country. People can still talk to strangers, though less often than in earlier decades.

In the 20th Century, as in earlier decades, the nation could take pride in its inventiveness. For a small nation Australia was inventive in a wide variety of fields, from agriculture to medicine, and from engineering to the fine arts.

Some of these inventions the Australian people hardly know about. Thus, in the global history of metallurgy, which is one of mankind's most valuable skills, the three or four great innovations of all time would include the flotation process. Mainly invented and applied at Broken Hill in the years 1902 to 1914, and the achievement of trained metallurgists as well as humble millmen, this remarkable bubble-centred process is now used on a large scale in every

corner of every continent to extract minerals.

Australia has also been quick to apply and adapt imported technologies, whether in aviation or the internet. It has been a remarkable supplier of minerals, foods and fibres to the outside world – commodities often produced in the face of high obstacles. That maybe 40 times as many people now live in this continent as lived here in 1788, and that five times as many people live here as in 1901, is a story of high success by most criteria. I do not subscribe to the view that Australia now is over-populated, though the arguments of the dark-green critics merit attention.

Another achievement of the nation is simply its survival. One of the main purposes of a nation is to defend itself, to stay alive. Australia, unlike so many other nations of European peoples, was not conquered in the 20th Century. Large numbers of young Australians were willing to defend their country and that of their allies; and Gallipoli is part of a powerful tradition which honours sacrifice. At the same time Australia was not so well prepared for the Second World War as for the First World War, and that helps to explain why thousands of Australians became prisoners of war in south east Asia.

There is also a facet of the Second World War which is easily forgotten. In the darkest period of the war, the Allied side was frail indeed, and for a time the Allies three main surviving nations were Britain, Canada and Australia. It is now almost forgotten that Australia's industrial war effort between 1939 and 1945 was extraordinary, preparing the way for so much of the long period of industrialisation that followed. It is also now almost forgotten that Australia mass-produced military aircraft before it mass-produced the Holden car. I was heartened to read Brian Toohey, the journalist, responding to those who claimed that the staging of the Sydney Olympics, an impressive achievement, was possible only because of Australia's new economic maturity or its recent multicultural background or its new sense of self-esteem. Toohey hinted that the industrial war effort in the early 1940s was a more formidable and more sophisticated venture in construction than Homebush, its rail links and its surrounds.

I conclude that Australia since 1901 has been more a success story than a failure. Others might reach my conclusion by a different route. Others, especially those wearing the black arm-bands, will not support my conclusion.

It was John Stone who suggested that at this morning's session I should primarily assess the adequacy of the Black Arm-Band School of History as a description of Australia since 1901. First, I must offer a word about the origin of this phrase.

The recent *The Oxford Companion to Australian History* has an entry under the heading "Black-armband history", written by the historian Mark McKenna, and implying that I took the phrase from Aboriginal history. No doubt he had gleaned that idea from other historians and felt entitled to pass on what was now "common knowledge". He also noted that as early as 1970, and especially in 1988, some black Australians wore black arm-bands as "a symbol of the historical dispossession of Aboriginal people". Inga Clendinnen in her recent Boyer lectures on the ABC seemed rather vexed that I had borrowed a phrase from the Aborigines and then turned it against them. I hasten to add that the phrase was neither borrowed from the Aborigines nor was it, in the way I used it, anti-Aboriginal. It seems to have been converted into an anti-Aboriginal phrase by historians, politicians and commentators who then complained in public that it was anti-Aboriginal.

May I briefly explain the origin of the phrase I coined. I quote from a letter I wrote on 14 August this year, at the request of the historian Mark McKenna after he learned orally in London that he had misunderstood the origins of my phrase:

"Dear Mark, Thank you for the gracious letter.

"I first used the phrase 'Black Arm-band' on Wednesday 28 April, 1993 in the Latham Memorial Lecture in Sydney. It aroused no interest at the time. Indeed it had no popular usage, so far as I know, until Mr Howard used the phrase three or so years later.

"It was early in the football season, and I took the phrase from the very old custom, in

Australian Rules Football, of players wearing a black arm-band to honour an old player and official who died in the previous week. By chance, today, when your letter arrived from London, *The Age* showed on page one a photo of a player wearing a black arm-band. I enclose it”.

I went on to add that the custom of wearing black arm-bands at a time of mourning belongs essentially to white, not black, Australian traditions.

My phrase, “black arm-band” would have died the slow death of most phrases but for the fact that Mr Howard, soon after he became Prime Minister in 1996, used it in the annual Sir Robert Menzies Lecture at Monash University. He did not attribute the phrase to me but he used it in a reasonable context, and I have no complaint of his enunciation of the phrase. Moreover he did not use it in the way which is increasingly attributed to him by opponents in public: he did not use it to wipe out misdeeds from the past. He pointed to some of the misdeeds. Thus he wrote:

“Injustices were done in Australia, and no-one should obscure or minimise them. We need to acknowledge as a nation the realities of what European settlement has meant for the first Australians, the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, and in particular the assault on their traditions and the physical abuse they endured”.

Those sentences were immediately forgotten. It is easier to abuse opponents if you frequently misrepresent their position.

Suddenly the phrase, the black arm-band view, was hyperactive. Many people on the left, especially academics and politicians and journalists, were indignant. Some Aboriginal leaders were also indignant. Because Mr Howard had used it, they thought that it must be slanted, historically, and might even be racist and discriminatory. It was soon learned that the phrase had originally been coined by me. That did not cool the indignation. The idea of actually reading my article or the context in which Mr Howard alluded to my phrase did not seem to occur to those historians most interested in the idea.

In the first seven years after coining the phrase I doubt whether I was once asked by a member of the media or an historian how the phrase had been coined, let alone what it meant. As it happened, the phrase was deemed by many academics and members of the media and left wing politicians – those who were most interested in it – to be a reference solely to Aborigines, and was often deemed to have a racist overtone. In fact, the phrase referred not simply to Aborigines but also to the Chinese, Kanakas, women, the environment – indeed to many facets of Australian history, and especially to the balance of the negative compared to the positive.

As for the idea that my phrase was essentially anti-Aboriginal, may I quote a passage (because nobody else ever has quoted it) from my original speech:

“After the British arrived, the treatment of Aborigines was often lamentable: the frequent contempt for their culture, sometimes the contempt for the colour of their skin, the removal of their freedoms and usually the breaking of their precious link with their tribal homelands. And also the killing of them, in ones and tens and even occasionally in the hundred”.

I even said in the original speech that “it may be that as many as 20,000 Aborigines were killed, predominantly by Europeans but sometimes by Aborigines enrolled as troopers”. This was the speech that Noel Pearson, EG Whitlam, Henry Reynolds, Lois O’Donoghue, the Boyer lecturer, Mrs Holmes a’Court, Phillip Adams and dozens of others have totally misunderstood.

I used the wearing of the black arm-band to refer not simply to the treatment of Aborigines. I also used it to refer, amongst other things, to the treatment of the environment. I accept that the treatment of the environment is one of the defects in Australian history. I do not need to dwell on this defect: on the extinction of a variety of species of birds and animals, on the growing salinity of the soil on the plains of the south-west of WA and the Riverina and northern Victoria, on the excessive clearing of unusual forests, on the silting of rivers. And yet the harming of the environment, especially in the south-east quarter of the continent, is the price of success in

another sphere: the extraordinary economic development in the face of high obstacles, whether low and erratic rainfall, puzzling geology, hungry soils, long distances, and unfamiliar vegetation.

It is to the credit of Australians in the last third of the 20th Century that they began to feel more concern for the natural environment. It is also to the credit of an earlier generation of Australians that they had battled so hard in the face of a difficult environment. It should be added that the treatment of the environment by human beings in nearly every part of the world has been defective if you see the environment as an entity commanding high respect. But if you see human beings and civilisation as also deserving high respect, then the rise of civilisation was possible only because earlier generations succeeded in mastering to some degree, and altering, the environment. Nothing did more to alter the natural environment around the world than that great step forward in human history, the domesticating of plants and animals some 10,000 years ago. The black arm-band school of history sometimes tends to forget what has happened through a long period of environmental history and to imply that Australia in recent times was almost uniquely blameworthy.

The black arm-band view of history implies that Australia's failures exceed its successes, and that the treatment of the environment and the Aborigines are two of the facets which, in total, are so shameful that they outweigh the nation's successes. I concede that in these two facets the scope for blame is legitimate and wide, but I see mitigating factors which historians have some obligation to consider, especially when discussing relations between Aborigines and other Australians.

My view on Aboriginal history is not orthodox, but I have held it for a long time while listening carefully to the criticisms sometimes directed towards it. As I am sometimes said to be the only Australian to write both a history of Aboriginal Australia and a history of modern Australia, I do not feel that I am totally out of my depth, though I remain conscious of how much there is still to learn and how much already known is still worthy of debate.

My view is that in 1788 Aboriginal and British cultures were so far apart that, even with the best will on both sides, a long series of misunderstandings were bound to arise; that in attitudes to possessions, to kinship, to land, and to work, the Aborigines were as poorly equipped for the society they were forced to join as the British would have been ill-equipped if they had had to join the Aboriginal societies and abandon their own culture and religion. In short, Aboriginal disadvantage – for participating in the new life – was there from the start but was compounded by what happened later. The Maoris, living in a sedentary as distinct from a nomadic or semi-nomadic society, had far less disadvantage. As a sedentary people, they were far less divided than the Aborigines, and more powerful militarily. As a sedentary people, they were more capable of adapting to the new intruding world. As a result, they occupied a less unhappy position within white society than did most Aborigines in 1901.

In the to and fro of political debate it is understandable that Aboriginal leaders, and their white supporters, should place nearly all of the blame on Australian society for the serious Aboriginal disadvantages "since the British colonisation". But those Australians, black or white, who wish to understand the present position, and to improve on it, should be wary of such a simplistic and racially-loaded argument; an argument which even appears in the latest brochures issued by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Indeed, the self-respect of Aborigines would suffer another blow if Australians generally were equally to apply – and unfortunately some do – such a simplistic and racially-loaded line of argument to the long Aboriginal history before 1788.

Aborigines are right to demand a better deal, right to draw attention to urgent grievances and disadvantages. They are entitled to take pride in much of their history, entitled to be treated as equal. But perhaps some of the blame which they – and their wide range of other supporters – place on the Australian nation is unrealistic.

One elementary fact should enter the discussion. Through no fault of their own, the Aboriginal peoples were partly disadvantaged, by their own history as a people and by their long

isolation or relative isolation from the outside world. It is significant that the same kind of British officials and settlers, coming to the southern hemisphere in the 19th Century, conceded an early treaty and early land rights for the indigenous inhabitants of New Zealand, but not for those of Australia. They also accorded voting rights to Maoris far more readily than to Aborigines.

Why did the British settlers have such different attitudes to the people on contrasting sides of the Tasman Sea? The cultural background, and the political and economic way of life, of the nomadic Aborigines compared to the sedentary New Zealanders was so difficult to understand. Moreover, in the early years of British settlement or invasion, the Aborigines, through no fault of their own, rarely were able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the incoming society. Many were offered schooling, many were offered the chance to farm, many were offered the chance to live in towns, but such opportunities meant little or nothing to them, for their old way of life was so far removed from the alternative and imperfectly-glimpsed life placed before them.

For Aborigines, the dearth of voting rights as well as the absence of land rights stem from the same dilemma. It is a strong – and understandable – grievance that for maybe half of the 20th Century the Australian nation deprived many Aborigines, perhaps even most, of the right to vote. What proportion of adult Aborigines had the right to vote in 1900, 1930 and 1960 is not known. In recent years it has been widely claimed, especially in daily newspapers, that Aborigines had no vote until the 1967 federal referendum, but this claim is untrue. Many Aborigines had the vote in the 19th Century – there were no legal restrictions in several of the six colonies – and many Aborigines had the right to vote in the first federal election. At the same time there was a variety of restrictions, differing from colony to colony and from State to State, limiting the right of certain Aborigines to vote.

Beyond doubt the Aborigines usually had a low ranking in the civic culture of the 1890s, when the founders of the federation drew up a Commonwealth Constitution which did not treat Aborigines, and especially those of total Aboriginal ancestry, as equals. Why did the Aborigines, electorally, rank low? I have not seen the reasons set out but an attempt to state them is worthwhile.

Firstly, throughout the world the system of democracy was new and experimental. Democracy was feeling its way step by step, and Australia was a leader in those steps. In the world as a whole in 1900 the overwhelming majority of adult people did not have the right to vote. Even in Australia, a leader in democracy, about half of the population did not have a right to vote. Thus, when the Commonwealth Constitution was shaped, most women, white or black, did not have the vote. Therefore the depriving of many Aborigines of the right to vote was not so abnormal.

Secondly, the ideology of Australia's experimental democracy was different from the ideology of today's democracy. Thus, in the early stages of Australian democracy some categories of people – for instance, public servants – were excluded from the vote because they were seen as special beneficiaries of the government. Full-blooded Aborigines, more than poor white people, were seen as special beneficiaries, and were viewed, unlike most able-bodied white people, as possessing a special right to welfare even before the rise of the welfare state. Noticeably in the first Commonwealth *Electoral Act* of 1902, there were even limitations on the electoral rights of white civil servants. Residents of Canberra, the national capital, for long were limited in their electoral rights.

There was a third reason for the lower standing of Aborigines in the new democratic culture. Aborigines were the least educated group of Australians at the very time when literacy was regarded as almost an essential prerequisite for the running of a democratic nation. My understanding – and I could be mistaken – is that those Aborigines most likely to lack electoral rights in the first half of the 20th Century were those who were closest to the traditional way of life, and therefore were lacking in literacy as well as in participation in mainstream life. Generally

this electoral exclusion was based more on cultural differences, or on perceived cultural differences, than on race. Thus Maoris living in Australia had the right to vote, and this right was specifically spelled out by the Commonwealth Parliament in 1902.

Two additional reasons for excluding numerous Aborigines from participation in elections must be added. Undoubtedly, racially-based feelings were directed towards them. On the other hand, these feelings were not predominant, and such a conclusion is suggested partly by the fact that Maoris resident in Australia were given the right to vote.

The relative lack of voting rights – and the rise of the erroneous idea that Aborigines never had the right to vote until 1967 – especially vexed Aborigines who came of age in the period when distinct and articulate Aboriginal protests began to echo throughout the land. And who could blame them for their sense of grievance? Likewise, this same electoral history of the treatment of Aborigines is, in the eyes of many of today's students, incredible and unforgivable. But rarely if ever is a realistic attempt made to explain to those students, or to Aboriginal leaders of today, the experimental nature and the cultural assumptions of Australia's system of parliamentary democracy in and around 1900. The black arm-band view of history rests partly on a failure to understand facets of the past.

The black arm-band view can also be seen in the way historians, writing in the last decade, view Aboriginal history before 1788 and all-Australian history after 1788. Criticisms of the behaviour of traditional Aboriginal society are now rare. And yet if the same standards of judgment were applied before or after 1788, Aboriginal society would be seen to have its grave defects just as its successor had its grave defects.

Over a long period of time there is a valid case for indignation and regret about the European treatment of Aborigines – and even the Aboriginal treatment of Aborigines when the continent was their own – but a sense of proportion is needed. Thus in the last quarter century a massive effort has been made by the Australian nation to redress injustices; and Aboriginal leaders have played a strong part in that effort. The national effort embraces land rights and mineral rights, tertiary education, health, sport, the Aboriginal arts, the creation of the Aboriginal super organisation ATSIC, and even the benign definitions of Aboriginality. The tragedy is that a lot of the help, and outback health is a strong example, has not really succeeded. In several fields Aborigines have been singled out for affirmative action, and there is a case for it – so long as the fragile morality of it is recognised by its supporters. The danger is that a later generation will see affirmative action, when carelessly implemented, as close to a combination of racism and hypocrisy. As we know only too well, a later generation will sometimes be tempted to see its predecessors in a less friendly light than the predecessors saw themselves.

Today I am not tackling a full range of the relevant topics, for time is short. Likewise I barely touched on the thorny topic of immigration in my speech of 1993. A few additional words are called for. There is no doubt that many Australians who, all in all, tend to despise the past of their own country do so because of the White Australia policy. This policy will continue to be an embarrassment to many Australians, especially to those of Chinese descent, for the Chinese and to a lesser extent the Japanese were the targets of what were often intemperate and sometimes venomous attacks. It is perfectly valid for the wearers of the black arm-band to devote a measured amount of indignation to the White Australia policy, but they also have a responsibility to explain why the policy was created.

Today most historians and teachers of history assume that a century or more ago the Chinese were innately peace-loving, whereas the white Australians were innately racist and sometimes violent. In the period 1850-1900, however, anti-foreigner feeling sometimes ran hot in China. Indeed, it was much more dangerous to be an Australian woman in China than it was to be a Chinese man in Australia. This does not condone Australian gold diggers' behaviour at Lambing Flat or other scenes of riot on the goldfields. But a little knowledge of what happened in China does make one wonder at the oft-repeated assumption that there was something unusually

racist about Australians, as distinct from the Chinese and other Asian peoples in 1900 and earlier.

It is sometimes argued that in 1901 the founding fathers of the Federation should have set up what is now called a multicultural society, and that all the Chinese and Japanese and Indians who wanted to settle here should have had the same chance of migrating as, say, the Irish or the Germans. As many Australians of 1901 had experienced a multicultural society on their own goldfields, and had concluded that in the conditions of those times it didn't work, they were not very likely to enter lightly again on such an experiment. It would of course have been most uplifting if they had decided on such an experiment. But no democratic society had so far tried such an experiment and at the same time given the newcomers voting rights.

It is easy to denounce the immigration policies of 1901 and earlier years. But what was the alternative? The critics of 1901 are usually silent about the alternatives; and yet the craft and art of politics is essentially the art of weighing the alternatives. Is it, for example, proposed by modern critics that in 1901, and earlier, the Chinese should have been allowed to enter Australia in large numbers and, at the same, receive voting rights and citizenship? Or were they to settle here but be deprived of voting rights until such time as they became property-holders or literate in the English language? When compulsory military training for young males was implemented a few years before the First World War, should Chinese Australians of the same age have been exempt if they spoke no English? As Australia, in addition, was then embarking on the welfare state and the bold experiment of setting a minimum wage for factory workers, should it have endangered the success of that experiment by allowing a new influx of Chinese who, with the eager support of many employers, would have been tempted to work for low wages at the very time when there was a legislative assault on low wages? Or, as a compromise, should an annual quota have been imposed on the incoming Chinese, with the compensating clause that they be permitted to take out citizenship and receive voting rights after a certain time in Australia?

These, and allied questions, are difficult for a historian to answer today, and to answer in the light of the political and social practicalities of 1901, or even in the light of the high ideals of the year 2000. I doubt whether I have seen these questions, and the alternatives embodied, seriously tackled by the new school of historians who write or imply that large numbers of immigrants from Asia should have been allowed to land and stay.

How the new Commonwealth of Australia shaped its immigration rules was not surprising in the context of the times and in the light of the trio of facts: that it was a new democracy, a new welfare state, and a concept of citizenship which – unlike our own – called for citizens to share in the custodianship of the nation, called for an undivided loyalty now considered to be excessive, and called for some sharing of responsibilities in time of war or preparation for war.

On the other hand, many critics might say, "I wish the immigration policy had been articulated with more courtesy and humanity". Surely they are right in so saying. Moreover they are correct in regretting that the old White Australia policy, though long overthrown, still leaves us with a bad name in parts of Asia and especially in Asian newspaper offices.

But the damning legacy in Asia has been needlessly aggravated by the various Australian politicians, sociologists, historians, clergy and journalists – larger in influence than in number – who have positively encouraged Asian critics to recall or denounce Australia's former immigration policy, while failing to add – for the cultural cringe is alive and well – that many Asian policies on migration and citizenship are highly restrictive. Moreover, some of these critics do not quite understand what might have been, in the second half of the 19th Century, the unpalatable alternatives to the White Australia policy. It is not unfair to ask these critics to spell out their own policy preferences: would they, for example, prefer to have seen a diminution of democracy in Australia in 1901, or a halt to the welfare state in 1901, so that an unrestrictive immigration policy could have been implemented? In essence, neither the infant welfare state, nor the belief in extending the foundations of democracy laid in the 1850s, might have flourished if large scale Asian immigration had been allowed throughout the period from say 1850 to 1940.

The dismantling of the restrictive immigration policy, from the 1960s, was a legitimate and wise response to new conditions and times. Perhaps, however, the creation of that policy in 1901 – and the policy has its parallels in Asian nations even today – was also a wise response to unusual conditions and to a thorny dilemma which has now slipped from sight.

A wide range of Australian rhetoric in 1901 loaded the dice against the Chinese and Japanese to a degree that was, at times, patently unfair and untrue. And yet the present criticism of how former Australian legislators set about their legislative tasks in 1901 probably represents a similar loading of the dice – with an emphatic conclusion that is hardly fair.

As human beings we sometimes move from one extreme to another. A task of the historian, a difficult task, is to audit those extreme swings of opinion. In my view those historians, politicians and commentators – and even those High Court Justices – who now wear the black arm-bands, tend to offer an unfair assessment of that earlier Australia. Criticisms, often strong criticisms, can fairly be made of Australia since or before 1900. But on the balance, the nation's story is more a success than a failure, unless by chance the failures on certain fronts are exaggerated.