

Howard's address to history summit

August 17, 2006

This is an edited text of John Howard's address to the history summit in Canberra today.

"The Government's purpose is very, very plain, and that is that we do want to bring about a renaissance of both interest in and understanding of Australian history and that must involve a greater focus on the disciplined teaching and understanding of history in Australian schools.

"My assessment is that it varies enormously around the country. Some parts of Australia, the school curriculum has a welcome emphasis, in other parts I don't believe it does. I want to make it very clear that we are not seeking some kind of official version of Australian history. We're not seeking some kind of nostalgic return to a particular version of Australian history, although I do not believe, and the Government does not believe, that you can have any sensible understanding, and therefore any sensible debate, about different opinions of Australian history unless you have some narrative and method in the comprehension and understanding of history. How we can just teach issues and study moods and fashions in history rather than comprehend and teach the narrative, have a narrative, has always escaped me.

"I don't think you can have a proper teaching and comprehension of Australian history, of course, without having a proper understanding of indigenous history and the contribution of the indigenous experience to Australia's development and the Australian story. Equally I don't believe that you can have a proper understanding of Australian history without some understanding of those movements and attitudes and values and traditions of other countries that had an influence on the formation of Australia. And obviously we need an understanding of those institutions we inherited from the British and the other European influences on Australia. We need to understand the influence of religion in the formation of attitudes and development in Australia. We obviously have to see Australia as heavily influenced by the western intellectual position, the Enlightenment and all that's associated with it. And I think we also have to appreciate the impact on Australia of the various economic developments and the changes in economic history, the influence of the industrial revolution and various broad economic theories that have shaped the modern Australia.

"Now I don't think that amounts for a moment to any kind of authorised version of Australian history. I think it amounts to, in the Government's view, a commonsense belief that we do need to understand all of those things to have a proper understanding of what did occur and what influences have shaped the modern day Australia.

"I want to thank all of you, and I want to thank the Minister for her energy and I really am very, very pleased indeed that we have such a wide range of people here today and I think that indicates that there's a lot of interest in this subject. There are some

things that strike, that have a bit of a resonance when you say something about them. Some things Prime Ministers say don't have any resonance at all, but occasionally you say things that have a bit of a resonance and there is a bit of a feeling that we ought to know more.

"I don't want to give *The Australian* newspaper a free plug, but I know Julie (Bishop, education minister) in her speech last night quoted that article by Roy Eccleston about the experience of his daughter in having been taught in the American school system and been taught a little bit about some of the formative events in American history. And whilst I don't necessarily suggest we pick that up root and branch and transplant it, obviously we have our own way of doing it, but I thought it made a good point. It's not to...to have a knowledge of some of the key things that shape the modern Australia is not to automatically endorse everything that took place in Australia in the years that have preceded the year in which we live, nor is it to indicate a particular view.

"But I don't know how we can intelligently argue our different points of view about what the modern Australia is or what the future Australia should be without having a proper, orthodox understanding. Orthodox in the sense of properly instructed and according to some kind of coherent narrative. Unless we have that, I don't think we can have a proper understanding of our present.

"And finally can I say that, as an earnest I hope of the great commitment that the Government has to this, I intend to establish a Prime Minister's prize for Australian history. It will be awarded annually and it will be worth \$100,000 to the recipient. I will be providing some more details of the criteria but broadly speaking it will be for a substantial written work, could include a film or a documentary as well. I will invite a panel of eminent historians, separate and apart from the Government, to assess submissions to this and it will be awarded on an annual basis. And I think it will just be another earnest of the importance that this Government does attach, and I think it is something that will attract, not only the interests of obviously people who are involved in the teaching and comprehension of history but also the broader community.

"We do need to demonstrate in different ways the seriousness of our commitment. I do want the teaching of history to be a stand-alone subject in our school system. And can I say, to express the bipartisan character of this gathering, I do welcome Bob Carr's presence if I may be permitted to do so. I know, from my previous discussions with him, the interest he has in Australia and history generally and I know that he made a significant contribution to the cause when he was Premier of New South Wales.

"And I would like to see the total cooperation and involvement of the State Governments in this exercise. It is not a partisan political exercise. It is designed to give the young of Australia a better understanding than the products of our education system of the last 10 or 20 years plainly have of Australian and indeed world history, and I hope this group will make a contribution."

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