**Pyne Opens a New Front in the History Wars**

Federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne is a man of contradictions.

On one hand he has sought to portray himself as a staunch supporter of Aboriginal people in their quest to have the head of Aboriginal warrior Pemulwuy repatriated to Australia from the United Kingdom. In June 2013 Mr Pyne made a speech in Parliament whereby he reminded members that “Pemulwuy was an Aboriginal warrior from the Eora people around Sydney who resisted early British settlement in New South Wales. Pemulwuy was eventually caught and executed by the Colony of New South Wales in 1802”.

Mr. Pyne told Parliament that Pemulwuy’s “head was transported back to Britain, where it now lies in storage at the Natural History Museum.” Pyne further stated that Pemulwuy was “regarded as a hero to thousands of modern Indigenous Australians and to many members of the public at large, who see Pemulwuy as a figure of Aboriginal defiance, and his legacy remains an important part of Indigenous culture in Australia”.

Mr. Pyne pointed out to Parliament that during 2012 he had made efforts to have Pemulwuy's remains repatriated by making representations to the Director of the Natural History Museum and to the United Kingdom government. Whilst those efforts had been unsuccessful, Mr Pyne said that should the Coalition win government “we will make every endeavour to expedite this matter and return Pemulwuy's remains to the Eora people”.

These statements, along with Mr Pyne’s membership of the Parliamentary Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs from 1993-97, might lead one to think that he was a strong supporter on Aboriginal issues. But, as I said in my opening paragraph, Mr. Pyne is a man of contradictions.

During the early days of the Abbott administration Mr Pyne as Minister for Education has shown himself to be one of the more accident-prone and controversial Ministers in the new Government. His first major setback as Minister occurred very early with what has been described as a “political debacle” and a “combination of policy and political blunders” in relation to the Gonski education reforms. During a series of extraordinary political backflips Mr Pyne managed to alienate his State Liberal counterparts in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania and as Crikey.com said, “single-handedly turn an ordinary start for the Abbott government  into a complete stuff-up”

But the biggest contradiction in terms of Pyne’s earlier attempts to portray himself as a supporter of Aboriginal rights is his latest announcement of a review of the National Curriculum. In early January Mr. Pyne announced that he had appointed commentator Dr. Kevin Donnelly and University of Queensland Professor Ken Wiltshire, to conduct a short review of the national education curriculum. Like Mr Pyne’s attempt to fiddle with the Gonski reforms, this announcement seemed to be an ideologically driven attempt to undo six years of consultation, submissions and contributions from a huge number of people by the body responsible for developing the new system, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). .

ACARA, which had been chaired by one of my old history lecturers at University of Melbourne, Professor Stuart Macintyre, had received more than 20,000 submissions and surveys in relation to English, maths, science and history. In response to Mr Pyne’s announcement Professor Macintyre said, “''It's a great pity that the government has succumbed to the temptation to go for cheap political points at the expense of a political process which has been exhaustive... Whereas this (review) is to be conducted by two people who have particular backgrounds. How they're expected to apply expertise is beyond me, both in the subject areas and in curriculum.''

Macintyre is probably referring to Kevin Donnelly’s long association with the Liberal Party and his previous paid consultancies between 1997-2005 under the Howard government. It was also revealed in the Age newspaper that the Education Standards Institute of which Dr. Donnelly is the Director, is not really an independent body but rather the trading name for Impetus Consultants Pty Ltd, a business registered to the K Donnelly Family Trust. Consequently one must wonder about whether the review will be credible, expert or independent.

I believe that what we see now being played out is yet another chapter of the notorious “History Wars”. This is an unsavoury episode of Australian history that is of particular importance to Aboriginal people because it involves the ‘whitewashing’ and ‘airbrushing’ of the history of Australia. The History Wars debate is an attempt to perpetuate the great cover-up and denial of the truth of the Aboriginal experience in Australian history.

For those unfamiliar with the history of the History Wars perhaps I should give you a quick explanation.

For almost all of the last century the Aboriginal experience and voice in the history of Australia had been ignored, downplayed or sanitized in the teaching of Australian history. Anyone like me who had grown up in the 1950s in Australia would know that in schools very little had been taught about Australian history, and absolutely nothing had been taught about what had happened to Aboriginal people as a result of colonisation.

Then in the 1960s, a miniscule number of historians began examining and writing about the Aboriginal experience. These historians included C.D. Rowley, Manning Clark, Henry Reynolds and Humphrey McQueen. Thus for a relatively brief period Australians began to learn small aspects of the truth of the brutal effect colonisation had on Aboriginal people. Then, during the 1980s and 90s we saw a white backlash begin as conservative historians and political commentators objected to this more honest appraisal of history by claiming it was motivated by ‘left-wing bias’.

Two of the key protagonists in the History Wars debates have been historian Professor Geoffrey Blainey and conservative academic Keith Windshuttle.

Prof. Blainey had in 1984 triggered controversy when in a speech he had criticised Asian immigration, and then again in his 1993 *Sir John Latham Memorial Lecture*, when he coined the phrase "Black armband view of history”. That phrase began to be used, pejoratively or otherwise, by some Australian social scientists, politicians, commentators and intellectuals about historians whom they viewed as having presented an overly critical portrayal of Australian history since European settlement.

Keith Windshuttle really kicked along the history wars with the publication of his books *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847*, (2002), which accuses a number of Australian historians of falsifying and inventing the degree of violence in the past, *The White Australia Policy*, (2004), a history of that policy which argues that academic historians have exaggerated the degree of racism in Australian history, and *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume Three: The Stolen Generations 1881-2008*, which argues the story of the "stolen generations" of Aboriginal children is a myth.

Windshuttle became a national celebrity in a racist Australia looking to continue its long tradition of denialism about its treatment of Aboriginal people. He was controversially appointed to the Board of the ABC by the Howard Government along with fellow conservatives Janet Albrechtsen and Ron Brunton. Windshuttle’s ABC Board appointment was seen as an endorsement of his views on the part of Prime Minister John Howard, who in turn argued that an apology to Aboriginal peoples was inappropriate as it would imply "intergeneration guilt" and said that "practical" measures were a better response to contemporary Aboriginal disadvantage.

The History Wars debate dominated the Australian academic scene for the last decade of the last century and for the first decade of this century, but it was thought that with the advent of the new national education curriculum devised by Professor Macintyre and ACARA that many of the contentious issues of the History Wars had been laid to rest. However, with the new Education Minister Mr Pyne’s announcement of a “review”, it seems a new, destructive chapter is about to be written.

The only certainty in this new phase of the History Wars is that Aboriginal people and the truth are likely to be the losers.

**Gary Foley**

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