The future of history

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Abstract

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The Future of history

Rowan Cahill

‘Former Australian Prime Minister John Howard, the PM (1996–2007) who took Australia to war in Iraq (2003) in the bloody search-and-destroy mission against non-existent Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) recently confessed to being a little embarrassed.

On the September 2014 eve of the release of The Menzies Era, his book of hero worship about conservative Australian PM Sir Robert Menzies, Howard told an interviewer that, when it became public knowledge, the US intelligence reports he based his decision on regarding WMD were faulty, well, he was embarrassed. Not ashamed, mind you, not distraught … which might be expected, since he has a huge amount of civilian blood on his hands - no, just embarrassed.

According to Howard, the WMD reports seemed authentic at the time. No matter there was authoritative material in the public domain that said the WMD ‘intelligence data’ was flawed, basically a work of the imagination of toady security ‘experts’, the sort who tailor evidence to demand. As for the current imbroglio in Iraq and Syria and the ISIS menace, well, according to Howard, the rise of militant Islamic fundamentalism was a local thing, in no way related to the events of the Second Gulf War – to argue anything else was a ‘false reading of history’. And if Howard had been back in Menzies’ shoes in 1965, he too would have committed troops to the Vietnam War, based on the information available at the time, no matter the material available in the public domain at the time.

So what seems to be ‘real’ history in the world of John Howard? Well, for starters it is not about accountability, nor understanding why; it is not about linking the present with the past in any critical way. Like the WMD reports, it is about the appearance of authority, about packaging and seemliness – rather like his new book on Menzies, which is an overblown fan letter about a conservative Australian icon, a 700-page doorstopper from HarperCollins (a tentacle of the Murdoch Empire), lauded in the Murdoch press though not much more than an inflated undergraduate essay hugely reliant on secondary sources, hitching Howard to the coat-tails of Menzies the ‘statesman’ and reflecting on the ‘genius’ of a conservative era of government.

In the hands of Howard, Menzies is a brilliant statesman, a great Australian leader, and a great conservative. Not the war-monger who contrived to exempt himself from military service during the First World War, even though he had a militia commission that fitted him for the task (he had
higher responsibilities, like taking care of his future career as a lawyer and a
politician, which did not stop him writing verse in support of the war). Not the
Menzies, who as Attorney-General in 1938 used the despicable Dog Collar
Act to break a ban by waterside workers in Port Kembla (NSW) and ensure
the export of strategic materials to Japan during the Sino-Japan war. Not the
Menzies who came back from a tour of Nazi Germany in 1938 and told a
select audience of Melbourne’s elite that there were positives about Hitler’s
regime, particularly the way the trade unions had been tamed and how the
German people respected the state. Not the Menzies, who tried to ban the
Communist Party of Australia during the Cold War and tried to criminalise
sectors of the trade union militancy. Not the Menzies who took Australia to the
Korean War, and then to the Vietnam War, and who introduced conscription
to facilitate the latter; not the grovelling lover of all things ‘Royal’, who
declared his love for Queen Elizabeth II when she visited Australia in 1963,
using the words of Elizabethan poet Thomas Ford, ‘I did but see her passing
by, and I will love her till I die.’

Now, as Australia becomes involved in yet another ill-advised US imperial
feat of arms, in Iraq, (and maybe later in Syria) courtesy of the conservative
government of PM Tony Abbott, the Australian parliament intensifies domestic
powers of surveillance and control. For those who can look back on the past,
much is familiar: the disrespect for history, the refusal to learn from the
disastrous military past and the blinkered vision that has characterised
Australia’s decisions to follow the US since the 1950s.

If the current manipulation of the fear of terrorism by the government
seems familiar, along with the hysterical journalism about the ‘terrorist threat’,
well, it is- a rerun of the Cold War, with ‘communism’ replaced by ‘terrorism’.
And why not? The Abbott government is one that thinks like Howard does,
regarding the Menzies era as the golden age of conservative rule.

Over at the National Archives of Australia (NAA), researchers report
increased restrictive practices. The NAA is the repository of the records
generated by the agencies of the state. In the vaults of the NAA are important
keys to understanding the nations’ past, including the lies, perfidies and the
secrets that are part of ‘government’. Access to NAA records has been
traditionally restricted by the 30-year-rule, meaning the records can be legally
accessed after the passage of 30 years. A previous Labor government
reduced this to 20 years. It is understood the Abbott government is looking to
increase the period of restriction: 70 years has apparently been mooted.

Current researchers are reporting difficulties: long delays in the processing
of applications for documents; the heavy culling of released material; the
closure of some historical records previously open; and the cutting down of
hours the NAA reading room is open to researchers. Distinguished Canberra historian and journalist Gregory Pemberton has described a government policy aimed at producing ‘a partial lobotomy of the Australian mind’.

It seems to me that the officially encouraged approach to history for some time to come will be that of the amnesic kind. In this era of extraordinary coercive ‘national security’ legislation, which has cleared the way for criminalising some forms of journalism, and enabled long prison sentences for transgressing journalists, it is not fanciful to imagine that at some time in the foreseeable future, some historians and some forms of critical history, might also be outlawed.

Rowan Cahill is a sessional teaching academic at the University of Wollongong