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The history wars rage on

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The history wars rage on Australia: 'invaded' or 'occupied'? It's a question that goes to the heart of who we are, writes NORMAN ABJORENSEN.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull believes Australia was "invaded" by its European settlers while his predecessor, Tony Abbott, disagrees, preferring to call it an "occupation." This is not, however, about semantics: it goes to the very crux of what we are as a nation and who we are as a people.

It raises questions of profound significance. For example, were we as a nation conceived in sin or in virtue? In terms of constructing a narrative about European settlement and Indigenous dispossession, the starting point decisively shapes the edifice, and the Turnbull starting point leads to an entirely different road from the Abbott starting point.

This is the burning question at the heart of what became known as "the history wars" and on which radically divergent interpretations turn. But the argument really is only partly about the past, and far more about the present; it is a struggle for legitimacy between two conflicting, and generally irreconcilable, histories. The key questions raised are: Whose country is it? Who are we? What kind of a people are we?

And, most importantly, what is the authentic narrative of our journey from the past to the present and what does this narrative indicate about our future? A conservative critic of what was pejoratively derided as the "black armband school" of history, John Roskam of the Institute of Public Affairs, is perfectly correct when he locates the history wars firmly within the arena of political contention. Writing in *The Age* in 2009, Roskam noted that the kind of history taught to school students was "a political issue that goes to the core of our concept as a nation". It made a vast difference, he wrote, whether that history regarded Australia as having been "settled" or "invaded". It matters because the nature of our origins as a society not only affects, but substantially shapes, our collective sense of self today. It is more than just abstract "national identity"; it is a struggle for cultural hegemony between those seeking to legitimise colonialism and its consequent Indigenous dispossession and those who insist that it is necessary to critically examine the view that colonialism was a civilising force and expose the structural violence in settler conquest and rule.

The history wars matter because historical memory is not just a matter of standardising what is taught in schools; it is about addressing the past and dealing with unresolved issues from that past, however painful and uncomfortable that process might be. Without that necessary catharsis it is impossible to live authentically in the present.

Australia is by no means alone with its fractured psyche. The United States, for example, has a dark past of its own that is still far from reconciled; Britain has its often brutal colonial legacy and its pivotal role in the slave trade; France is doubly

accursed with its issues of Nazi collaboration and its shameful cultural genocide in Algeria; South Africa has its apartheid past; Germany has its Nazi ghosts; and Japan has its militarism; Israel still resiles from the realities of dispossession from its formation; and the nations of eastern Europe struggle with an assortment of maladies from the anti-Semitic, Communist and Fascist pasts.

Speaking last week, Tony Abbott took issue with Malcolm Turnbull's professed sympathy with the "invasion" view. Noting with considerable understatement that what happened in 1788 and beyond "involved a very, very big change and it was a change that had pretty big consequences for the Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia", he emphatically rejected the idea of invasion. Why? "I think that connotes the primacy of armed force," he said.

It was of course a military expedition that came to Australia with the first convicts; it was military rule that prevailed in the early colonial years; and it was military action, abetted by eager settlers, that secured the land for agricultural and pastoral production. It was very much an occupation, supported by force, but it is hard to see how this was not preceded by invasion.

Even on the purely semantic level, it is difficult to see how Britain could take possession of the country by "settling", since there were already people living in Australia.

Tony Abbott is at least consistent.

In 2014, while still prime minister, he gave a speech in which he said that Australia had been "unsettled" before the British arrived and it owed its existence to Britain's "form of foreign investment". He added: "Our country is unimaginable without foreign investment ... I guess our country owes its existence to a form of foreign investment by the British government in the then unsettled or, um, scarcely settled, Great South Land." He clearly then, and now, clings to the discredited notion of terra nullius, the High Court's ruling notwithstanding.

It is difficult to see how meaningful reconciliation can be achieved when such attitudes persist in high places. A constant demand by Indigenous Australians, as part of constitutional recognition and acknowledgement of their history and culture, is the need for a treaty, a formal line drawn in the sand and a set of conditions to enable us all to move ahead, but as long as the very real nature of the conflict is denied, this cannot happen. For there to be a treaty there has to be an acknowledgement of hostilities.

Australia has to look only to New Zealand to see how this can be done.

The Treaty of Waitangi, while far from perfect and still in contention, was signed with the Maori peoples as long ago as 1840, according them recognition as well as certain rights.

More importantly, it tacitly acknowledged the reality of the colonial project - forcible imposition of foreign sovereignty.

But that is a step we have yet to take in Australia as we continue to quibble over (hostile) invasion versus (benign) settlement.

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