

John Howard doesn't get it.

He wants us to put the past behind us. He has nothing to apologise for. "It's time to focus on the future."

Sounds right. Is wrong.

John Howard is trying to tell us that we should treat the present as a blank sheet. Forget about history.

Trouble is—you can't. All of our present reality is built on the foundations of the past. What our parents did or did not do, affects us as children.

Present day prostitutes in St Kilda are living today with the effects of yesterday's child abuse and drug addiction.

Present day Palestinians are living today with the effects of yesterday's displacement and homelessness.

Present day Aboriginal people are living today with the effects of yesterday's removal and assimilation.

Present day politicians are living today with the effects of Menzies, Whitlam, Fraser and Keating. Perhaps, uniquely for politicians, regular elections erase the past from their awareness. Each election appears to wipe the slate clean rendering the effects of prior politics invisible.

This invisibility is a dangerous illusion. The reality is that the past plays itself out in the present and future. Every day. And for many days.

The legacy of history is sometimes positive. Some inherit great wealth and power from their parents. Some inherit great talent and sensitivity. Few would ask such people to erase their history and just "focus on making things better for the future."

But what if the legacy of history is negative? There is a common pattern that I have seen all over the world. It is a pattern that is reproduced here in our own country. I call it the 12 Step Program of Oppression.

1. An oppressor emerges.
2. The oppressor takes away the people's homes, sometimes destroying them, often relocating the people.
3. The oppressed people lose most of their possessions.
4. They are crowded together into refugee camps or reserves.
5. By one means or another, often with apparently reasonable excuses, families are split up.
6. They are policed by military style forces, or government officials. Often a Ministry for their affairs is created. This devises rules to control their lives. Usually this is labelled "Protection." Only limited self-government is permitted, and often none. Where it exists it is highly controlled by the oppressors.
7. Myths are created about the oppressed people. They are labelled as dangerous and deviant (terrorists, barbaric, savage, lacking culture, lazy).

8. Very often the myth is created that the oppressed people had no true society before the oppressor stepped in (in Australia this myth was extended to the idea *terra nullius*—they weren't even here!).
9. Some years on, the oppressed society becomes increasingly violent. Most of the violence is internal. Crime rates, especially crimes such as murder and assault, are twenty to fifty times greater than in mainstream society. This tends to confirm the myth that the oppressed people are lesser beings.
10. Often *radical* groups emerge and attack the mainstream society. This confirms the myth that the oppressed society is dangerous.
11. The dominant society appears to put money into services to *help* the dysfunctional community, but much of this money appears to do little good. Stories are common that the money is wasted or misused.
12. Drug abuse (usually alcohol) is commonplace. This confirms the myth that the people are lazy or incapable of self-control.

There is an intimate connection between the original oppression and the current state of these societies. To state it clearly, the original oppression creates the violence and dysfunctional aspects under which the oppressed communities labour.

The arrival of the white settlers after 1788 was, for the Aborigines, an act of violence. It created their death and displacement. They became the dispossessed, refugees within their own land. Their homes, their cultures, their beliefs, their organisational structures were destroyed and replaced by anomie and alienation.

No-one presently living needs to be blamed for the past oppression. Simply, it needs to be recognised and dealt with as the root of the present reality. Only when we own up to the notion that what happened in the past benefits some of us, and cripples others, can we do what John Howard is asking for.

This is what John Howard does not get.

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