

Letter to the Editor

Dr Deborah Henderson, Chair: History Educators' Network of Australia (HENA).

During the past 30 years the teaching of history in Australia has been transformed from rote-learning text book information - which students were expected to recall in examinations - to an emphasis on inquiry-based learning. An increasing emphasis on the teaching of Australian and Asian history has accompanied this shift in pedagogy. This has provided a corrective "sense of balance" (to use the Prime Minister's term), to the dominant narrative 'empire' histories that most Australians used to learn. Sadly, these advances have been misrepresented in John Howard's speech as succumbing to a "postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record or achievement is questioned or repudiated". Doesn't the Prime Minister understand that some of the great advances in the history of humankind have been made because people have questioned and challenged accepted practices? Within the Enlightenment traditions that the PM valorises, everyday taken-for-granted practices were based on assumptions that some human beings could be owned by others, and that women were inferior to men. These continued until challenged by Abolitionists who fought against the practice of slavery and Suffragettes who struggled for women to own property and vote.

John Howard needs to sit in a history classroom. There he would observe young Australians not only engaged in rigorous intellectual work but also learning more about the processes of causation, continuity and change that have shaped their nation and their world. The Prime Minister would see students posing questions, weighing up evidence, making decisions and debating points of view. Then he might realise why the skills of historical inquiry are such valuable life skills. If he spent time in the classroom, John Howard might also note the levels of empathy and understanding students develop for people in other places and times and their genuine joy of learning about the past.

In so many classrooms history teaching and learning are alive and well. The Prime Minister's comments fly in the face of this laudable reality.

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