

Retrospective guilt — contrition now for the 'foreign country' of the past

By Steve Waterson

There is a strange compulsion to confess in modern Western culture. In its mildest form it is revealed in the soul-baring of daytime talk-show guests; at its most perverse it demands that entire nations should bow their heads in impossible retrospective guilt.

The latter phenomenon, like the talk show, might be traced in recent years to the United States, or more precisely to President George Bush's "sincere apology" to Japanese American interned during World War 2. Last year Japanese politicians were reviled for expressing mere regret over the wartime atrocities of their forebears, rather than offering a full apology.

In the United Kingdom, new Prime Minister Tony Blair has apologised to the Irish people for the indifference of his ancestors to Ireland's suffering during the Potato Famine of the mid 19th century. His government is also considering posthumous pardons for 307 British soldiers executed for cowardice or desertion during World War 1.

In Australia, Prime Minister John Howard has been urged to join this international chorus of contrition with a full public apology to Aborigines removed as children from their fami-

lies by earlier governments. He has instead offered a personal expression of deep sorrow and regret that fellow Australians should ever have suffered such injustice. Some observers have declared his response inadequate. The condemnation is undeserved.

Mr Howard has done as much as anyone, prime minister or not, can rationally and sincerely do. Regret is appropriate, but it should not be confused with remorse. To apologise for crimes for which one cannot take responsibility offends against common sense, against history, and against the fundamental assumptions of Western civilisation. To refuse to do so shows greater integrity than does the alternative.

In Canada earlier this year, Alberta's Premier Ralph Klein was accosted by a mentally handicapped woman who had been sterilised in the 1940s in accordance with government policy. Accompanied by a television camera crew, she demanded an apology. The Premier said he had no reservations whatsoever about issuing a public apology on behalf of a government that no longer existed. Is that the kind of response sought of Mr Howard?

It is absurd to ask a man to apologise for acts done by others years before, as nonsensical as allowing him to take credit for another's past victories. Mr Howard enjoys cricket; the tri-

umphant Ashes tour of 1948 would be a real feather in his cap. Might he also be praised for granting Aborigines the vote in 1967?

Semantics aside, there are more profound reasons why Mr Howard is right to hold to a personal expression of sorrow. First, it is a tenet of 20th-century democratic societies that after a certain age the citizen is expected to bear personal responsibility for his actions. This is the basis of Western legal systems, which ensure children are not punished for the sins of their fathers and a mass murderer's mother is not punished for the evil done by the child she introduced to the world. It is regrettable that the guilty sometimes go unpunished, that they fail to atone for their offences, but there is no remedy for that.

After the restoration of the Stuart kings to the English throne in 1660, Oliver Cromwell's body was exhumed and hanged in the frustration of vengeance denied. Punishing a corpse seems foolish to modern sensibilities and therein lies the problem. Modern sensibilities are poor judges of the actions of the past. Were it possible to demand an apology of the politicians who delivered Aboriginal children into institutions or foster care, they would be outraged, for as well as responsibility, apology requires the acknowledgement of fault.

By the standards of their day they were without guilt. At other times, it has seemed to intelligent people eminently reasonable to burn old ladies for witchcraft, or open a vein to reduce fever.

In 1941, in the wake of Pearl Harbour, it must have seemed prudent to imprison Japanese living on the Western seaboard of the United States; to the British general directing offensives on the Somme, the possibility that their troops might refuse to fight must have seemed a threat to the very existence of the Empire.

"The past", wrote L. P. Hartley, "is a foreign country. They do things differently there". Not only is it foreign, its borders are closed and it is wrong to meddle in its internal affairs. The human race advances by learning from the mistakes of history, not by claiming them as its own and dragging an ever-lengthening chain of guilt. It is nobler by far to take responsibility for the present, to undertake never to repeat the errors of the past.

Who can say how many modern practices will seem monstrous or misguided to future generations? Before their judgement is delivered, it would be wise not to add arrogant revisionism to our list of sins.

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