

Dialogue: Sorry, it's not for historians to say

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The Games were not a weekend old when a political activist complained that they were displacing the serious things of life.

"Don't we do the serious things to earn the frivolities?" I asked. We were about to play tennis.

"Maybe I'm just a bad spectator," he said, putting a good ball past me.

I can't remember an Olympics like these. I suppose we were spectators, but with an event of that scale so near, you felt at times like a participant in a celebration of Australia.

While we ached for medals, wondered whether it was worth paying more tax to get them and pretended to begrudge Australia its success, we were delighted really that dirty old Sydney town was doing it so well.

And there was a serious dimension for Australians that possibly we understood more intimately than most others. The opening ceremony engaged the ghosts of their history as well as the glories. When great white women of the past handed the torch to an Aboriginal to light the flame, we understood.

We are in a similar post-colonial predicament, with one big difference: we have a treaty that many Australians envy.

Some of its terms are a source of endless argument and it has been given a meaning by the Court of Appeal that the signatories never contemplated. (But then, they never contemplated the devastation of Maori society either. That is precisely one of the dangers they were trying to avoid.)

The treaty, for all the dissension about it, has acquired the status and moral force of a constitution. Any suggestion that it now be incorporated in a legal constitution is opposed on grounds that it could be diminished.

With a solid reference point for our past and present race relations, we probably do not fully understand Australia's struggle with its history. If nothing else, the treaty is a statement of good intentions. Australia has no comparable testament. It has nothing except rigorous historical scholarship to counter the impression that the only fate its colonists ever intended for the natives was genocide.

Rigorous historical scholarship, unfortunately, is becoming a rare commodity in both countries. For some time now it has been steadily sacrificed to the contemporary need for post-colonial reconciliation.

It is not widely known in this country that treaty grievances no longer receive more than perfunctory historical research. Claims are quickly conceded as long as they fit into a general category of land alienation, and the Crown spends most of its time coming to the terms of settlement.

Frequently the terms include an apology. Australia is trying to deal in the historical apology, too. Prime Minister John Howard, to his eternal credit, has steadfastly avoided saying "sorry" for a plainly well-intentioned policy that involved removing Aboriginal children from their families in the bush.

If it were possible to acknowledge the best motives of the past, there would be no harm in apologising for the consequences. But in the climate of today it is seldom possible to give the past a fair hearing.

Not long before the Olympics, a court in the Northern Territory finally heard a test case brought by two members of the so-called stolen generation.

The judge took a long, dispassionate look at the evidence and decided the two had not been "stolen" from their families and that at the relevant time there was no policy of forcible removal of children in the Northern Territory.

Since then a similar case against the state of New South Wales has been thrown out of the Court of Appeal.

The decisions, of course, cut no ice with those who believe what they want to believe, and the fury that followed the first judgment threatened for a while to be visited on the Olympics.

These people are not concerned about the finer points of history. They want the past converted to a morality play for modern purposes. And the appalling thing is that historical scholarship today seems inclined to play along.

A generation ago, when I was taking every history paper on offer, we were encouraged to interpret the past on its own terms. The idea was to set aside the attitudes of the present and put yourself in the mind of the time.

The most highly regarded historical writing today is quite different. It judges the past by an assumed moral superiority of the present. It claims the right to do so by, first, denying that a truly objective excursion into the past is really possible.

(Oddly, intellectual fashion allows - in fact demands - an attempt to suspend subjectivity when looking across cultures, genders and classes but not across time, at least not where the dominant culture is concerned.)

Once the possibility of objectivity has been denied, history becomes no more than a story written for its own time. And some of its practitioners come very close to arguing that the purpose of history is to serve the needs of the present. Facts, of course, have been discounted along with objectivity. Recorded, documented, reasoned history is placed alongside orally transmitted folk memories. The story of the past is treated largely as myth for today.

This is a dark age for the discipline but it will pass. When it does, today's publications will look ludicrous. And the historical apology will be seen as the conceit it is. To apologise for the past is an affront to history as a study of humanity and an insult to people who can no longer speak for themselves.