

Peter Ryan: Apologise to Blainey

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AGHAST at their television screens as they watched Sydney's race riots, how many Australians cast their minds back 20 years to remember Geoffrey Blainey's thoughtful warning that such horrors might happen? Happen, that is, unless we reconsidered our program of almost indiscriminate immigration and the accompanying madness of multiculturalism.

I suppose very few viewers—or newspaper readers, or radio listeners—made the connection: if a week is a long time in politics, two decades is almost an ice age in the public memory span of history. Yet warned we were, and little heed we paid.

In mid-1984 Blainey, who then held the Ernest Scott chair of history at Melbourne University and was dean of the arts faculty, gave an address to the Rotary Club of Warrnambool, Victoria. This was hardly a commanding forum; there was no TV or radio coverage. Blainey's themes, quietly and soberly presented, were simply these: Australia each year was taking in migrants at a rate faster than the national fabric could absorb; many migrants were coming from backgrounds so starkly different from Australian norms that prospects of a social fit into our community might lie a long way off.

He went on to say that should a time come when ordinary Australians began to feel crowded or pressured by new arrivals, resentment might soon end the ready acceptance upon which migrants hitherto knew they could rely. Blainey's position was reasonable almost to the point of being obvious and appealed to the commonsense of anybody with worldly experience, and with some acquaintance with wider human nature, of whatever colour or culture.

For those who held a different view, the way was surely open to civilised debate with this most urbane and good natured of scholars.

No such thing!

Almost as if he had set a match to dry grass in summer, Blainey's few sensible words from quiet, coastal Warrnambool ignited an Australia-wide bushfire of howling criticism. The arsonists fanning the flames were his colleagues at the University of Melbourne's history department

On June 19, 1984, 23 academics published in Melbourne's *The Age* a letter that two decades later still holds some sad record for unctuous academic bilge, expressed with unprickable pomposity.

Drawing in their skirts and elevating their fastidious nostrils, they disowned their own professor, saying in effect that Australia's immigration program was a subject too delicate for him to be allowed to discuss, though clearly it was OK for them.

By inescapable inference, Blainey was a racist.

The issue soon surged beyond animated controversy to become a full-scale witch-hunt. There were disorders on campus, and threatened disorders if this vile man should be allowed to go on teaching. Students organised boycotts of his lectures. His colleagues hung him out to dry,

at least some of them slyly conniving in the wider campus hoo-ha. Acting to perfection the part of Pontius Pilate, the university gave the mob its head.

In this impossible situation, Blainey eventually resigned from his chair and Melbourne University lost one of its most distinguished, original and publicly accessible scholars. (A few years later it conferred on him the nowadays rather perfunctory distinction of emeritus).

To reread today the 23 signatures on the letter of 1984 is a curious experience. Going down the list, the mind stops repeatedly to ask: "Who? Who?" They resemble little dogs snapping at the heels of a stately thoroughbred.

On the part of many, envy of a more successful scholar was hard at work:

*When Heaven with such parts has blest him
Have I not reason to detest him?*

Only one of the clique reached enduring prominence in the public eye: Stuart Macintyre. In 1991, this former communist moved into the chair of history that Blainey had so thoughtfully vacated for him.

Blainey's gritty experience of the real world far exceeded that of his traducers. After taking his degree, he long avoided the sheltered workshops of academe, got out into the worlds of mining and business, and knocked about the country.

Then he wrote his books, based not only what he had read in the library but also on what he had seen and touched, and had learned from men and from managers. It was largely this quality of veracity, of actuality, that regularly made his books bestsellers, running to repeated new editions in paperback. Such success did little to diminish the glances of the green eyes of envy.

Blainey's experience of the world was what above all entitled him to express an opinion on how Australia might react to injudicious immigration, pushed too far and too fast. Compared to him, most of his colleagues in the history department were still wet behind the ears, with minds still damp in academic mental nappies.

The year after Blainey's resignation, on April 1, 1985, The Australian Financial Review devoted its editorial to a review of what by then had become a running academic scandal. Under the heading "Academic assassination", the editorial made plain its opinion that the political correctnesses of multiculturalism had suppressed proper public discussion of the undoubted disruptions being caused by some aspects of migration, and that freedom of speech was under attack from the "smelly little orthodoxies that dominate the humanities departments" in the universities.

The editorial expressed the paper's concern that the "extraordinary attack" on Blainey was "only too typical of the developing intolerance of genuine intellectual freedom in our universities, colleges and indeed schools". The motives of Blainey's critics were "to give a message to their weaker colleagues that dissent and dialogue will be punished heavily. Punished, too, would be full participation in public discussion, instead of jockeying for power in the groves of academe."

So there we had it, and not much has changed since. The dominant forces in academic history have laid down a rigid party line of accepted orthodoxy: don't expect to be promoted above the level of tutor if you don't toe it.

There may be signs that this rigid mould is cracking. It is now more than 10 years since Australia's historical charlatan-in-chief, Manning Clark, was toppled from his pedestal. It is today most unusual to hear Clark quoted as an historical authority on anything at all.

The labours of Keith Windschuttle are bringing sense and truth to our knowledge of white settlement and Aboriginal relations. Michael Connor's new book exposes the spurious doctrine of *terra nullius*, with which the history gang had spooked even the High Court.

But these will be mere battles by the way unless the main campaign for freedom of speech and inquiry can be won in the universities.

My own alma mater, Melbourne, is a specially sad case, having cravenly allowed one of the finest scholars of our time to be driven out by an academic lynch mob. Until amends are made to Blainey, Melbourne's claim to be an institution devoted to free inquiry will remain a joke. The very least that should be done is the creation and endowment in perpetuity within the university of a Geoffrey Blainey chair of history.

Melbourne (and not a moment too soon) has in Glyn Davis appointed a new vice-chancellor with ambitious plans to lift the university's reputation. A first step might be to establish the Blainey chair.

Nothing so adds to the standing of a university as a reputation for not evicting distinguished professors simply on the ground that they are doing their job well.

Remember, this is the man who, two decades ago, tried to warn us against what we all witnessed in Cronulla last weekend. Can a university—can a nation—do without such counsellors? Or should they be disposed of at the mere whim of the gruesome ideologues who still control Australian history?

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