The PM Came to Dublin: A report from Professor Hilary Carey, former head of the Keith Cameron Centre for Australian Studies.

The Australian people, including the electors of Bennelong, have cast their ballots and decided on a change of government. While Kevin Rudd sorts out his ministry, John Howard has disappeared from the familiar position of prominence he has occupied in the media for over ten years. But one unexpected place where the former Prime Minister may be remembered for rather longer than elsewhere is in Dublin. For it is thanks to a visit by the Prime Minister on 22 May 2006 that the Keith Cameron Chair of Australian History at University College Dublin has been refunded. I understand the advertisement for the first appointment under the new funding arrangements will appear some time soon.

Part of the job of being an historian is to try and imaginatively recreate the past, getting inside the heads of past politicians, great and small, and suggesting why they chose a particular course of action. There is a certain necessary hubris in this since most of us have little contemporary experience of political life and politicians. For me the PM’s visit to Dublin was a salutary reminder of the pressure, pace and high level of scrutiny that come with the top job.

The PM had not been to Ireland before; in fact the last Australian PM to visit Ireland was Paul Keating back in 1993. Ireland is now one of the wealthiest and most economically dynamic countries in Europe but traditionally her historic links with Australia have been sustained by Irish Catholic migrants and their descendants. While times are changing, Irish Australians have not been very visible in their support of the conservative side of Australian politics. Dublin, in other words, was not natural territory for John Howard.

For whatever reason, I was the only person in the public gallery when the PM came to address the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) and he seemed a bit nervous. Security had been tight and maybe he was worried at reports of strong opposition to his role in supporting the US-led war against terror. His speech referred to Australia’s historic and sentimental ties with Ireland, but he quickly moved on to more current issues. His main message focused on trade and the need for Ireland and the EU to lift barriers to Australian agriculture. In a country with a booming economy and an entrenched rural lobby this went down like a lead balloon. There was polite applause.
It was not for this speech that John Howard will be remembered in Dublin but because of his announcement the previous day when he visited University College Dublin (UCD) to address a question and answer session with postgraduate students.

Australian historians have been coming and going to teach at UCD since the late Patrick O’Farrell visited there in 1965-66, but the first visiting professor arrived in the 1970s. With the support of funding from Tony O’Reilly, the former rugby international and now Ireland’s richest man, Australian government was persuaded to put the appointment on a more secure footing. Rob Reece became the first Keith Cameron Professor and stayed three years in the post, from 1987-89. But by 2005 the cupboard was bare and the Principal of the Faculty had made it plain that there were no plans for my successor. So on the morning of the PM’s visit, when Ambassador Anne Plunkett rang me in the shower I was delighted to hear the news that she had managed to successfully negotiate renewed funding for the Chair.

I was in a happy mood while I watched the PM demolish the questions which a lively group of UCD students threw at him, seemingly oblivious to the television cameras and large press contingent in the room. Here is a man who knows his job, I thought. It was a good lesson in the way the media pick up stories that although the PM answered questions from his student audience on an enormous range of topics, only two or three got picked up in later stories: they were the ones on gay marriage (he did not approve), the occupation of Iraq (it was complicated but we would stick by the US), and - from a student in one of my Australian history classes - about an apology to the Australian Aborigines.

Since this was the one vaguely controversial question - apart from the one on gay marriage - let me quote both question and answer in full. This was the question: ‘Having spent some time living amongst varied indigenous groups in northern Australia NT, WA and Queensland, I am curious why it is deemed unnecessary for an official apology for white occupation of their traditional lands and whether there is or shall any Australian governmental federal or state policy toward building a better, brighter future for these isolated indigenous groups.’
As with every question posed by our well-primed and very polite student audience, the PM listened intensely and replied: ‘Well the reason why I don’t think it is appropriate for the Australian government to issue a formal apology for what you describe as white occupation is based on a philosophical view of mine and that is that you apologize for something for which you are responsible. I don’t take the pessimistic view of European settlement in Australia. Clearly the earlier treatment of indigenous people is the most blemished part of Australian history; I have never denied that. They were badly treated and mistakes were made. But the best way of assisting indigenous people is not to embrace some kind of idealized policy of separate development, rather it is to ensure that indigenous people get employment, health, education and other opportunities available to other Australians.’

In the interval between the PM’s visit to Ireland and today, I have not returned to the text of this exchange. At the time, I simply registered annoyance that he continued to assert a policy - that of denying an apology to the Australian Aborigines - with which I did not agree. I was also not impressed that he went on to recommend the work of Keith Winschuttle (though I rather wonder if he had actually read him). But I now notice several things I did not see before and which seem prescient in the light of the government’s intervention in the Northern Territory, and also his election commitment to introduce a referendum which would propose a change to the preamble of the Australian constitution to recognize the prior occupation of the Australian Aborigines.

Firstly, I notice that the PM regretted the past shameful history of the treatment of Australia’s indigenous people, though of course it is also clear that he does not consider this is something for which the present generation can be held responsible. And secondly he recognized that indigenous people need to have access to the same opportunities as other Australians. So maybe he was already thinking of a change to indigenous policy. And also, just maybe, being addressed with a well-informed question from an Irish student of Australian history helped push him in this direction.

Either way, it seems that the Australian funding directed toward Chairs and Centres of Australian Studies has been serving the purpose for which it was established. I like to think Keith Cameron, the engineer who served as the head of Ben Chifley’s Joint Coal Board and who was a believer in the capacity of governments to legislate for the best interests of the entire nation, might have been pleased about that.

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