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THE COLIN TATZ MEMORIAL LECTURE

SYDNEY

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In Colin's memory, I want to speak tonight about the essential role that history plays in our democracy.

About why we're stronger as a nation when we face our history with courage and confidence; and why we should always resist attempts by governments to censor that history.

Recently, the Parliament acknowledged the anniversary of our national apology to victims and survivors of institutional child sex abuse. As everyone now concedes, these Australians experienced an unforgivable betrayal.

But only after a Royal Commission revealed the undeniable scale of these crimes, did the majority of Australians realise the extent of the abuse.

Only then did we say sorry.

On the anniversary of this apology, the Prime Minister told the Parliament:

Days of reckoning have become an important part of our national story.

The Apology to the Stolen Generations ...

The Apology for Forced Adoptions ...

The Apology to the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants ...

The apologies reflect our acknowledgement of our failures as a people.

As a Liberal democratic people, we aren't afraid of our history.

Nor do we recoil from engaging with terrible truths.

It was one of the truest things this Prime Minister has said.

As liberal democracies, we *can* face our past.

But I'd go one step further — we must.

As liberal democrats;

as supporters of the free and open society;

we stand and fall by our commitment to truth.

It's one of the things that separates us from totalitarians – people who want to erase uncomfortable memories from public life.

Who want to dominate the past like they do their people.

We celebrate our successes and we face our failures with courage – and the confidence we will do better in the future.

If you value living in a free society, you know that history is a precious thing.

It's a gift: an endlessly fascinating, often surprising, always enriching gift.

But it's also a tool. It has a purpose. We study history – and by doing so, we become stronger as a nation.

I know there are some people who say we should only teach students the positives in our history.

That we should downplay difficult or uncomfortable moments; because they'll make our kids feel guilty, or ashamed, or unpatriotic.

The federal Education Minister, Alan Tudge, said this recently.

He said that history teachers should be, to use his words, less miserable and more optimistic; and stop examining events like Gallipoli.

Now, I'm an optimistic person by nature – and a patriot who loves her country deeply.

But how can we study the bravery of Gallipoli without also admitting the British command got it wrong?

That their maps were inaccurate.

That the landing didn't have enough fresh water.

That the whole mission was a massively risky gamble – and a mistaken one in hindsight.

This doesn't make the courage of our Anzacs any less inspiring – or their sacrifice any less meaningful.

If anything, the full truth adds weight to their tragedy and courage.

When we study Gallipoli, when we remember these heroes, we're studying the bravery and defiance that came to shape our national character.

Australian history is full of these moments.

Like the great shearers' strike, or the wharfies on the Hungry Mile, or the eviction protests during the Depression.

Or the Eureka Stockade – which ended in a resounding defeat in 1854, but which pushed Victoria to establish an electoral democracy in 1856.

These were moments when heroism was bound up in loss; when pain and struggle led to progress.

History rarely offers us simple lessons.

There's dark and there's light; and they're usually mixed in together.

This was something that Colin Tatz knew better than most.

I feel very privileged to be giving this lecture in his name tonight.

It comes, I think, with an obligation to be honest.

To avoid safe arguments or easy conclusions.

Because Colin never took the safe or easy path.

Colin dedicated his life to studying humanity's darkest moments.

When racial hatred produced mass murder.

He studied genocide.

As a Jewish boy who grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust; as a South African who lived through the barbarism of apartheid;

we can understand Colin's preoccupation with historic evil.

But on a personal level, it must have been incredibly difficult.

Staring into the abyss like he did – year after year.

It's difficult to imagine.

In his memoirs, Colin talks about when he first learned of the Nazi death camps – which would come to shape his life and scholarship.

It was at a movie theatre in 1945, during the Saturday matinee – which showed footage from Belsen as part of its newsreel.

Before the footage began, a voice came over the loudspeakers, telling all the children there to 'cover their eyes'.

When confronted by the Holocaust, most of us have felt this impulse at some point: to turn away from the horror.

But Colin never shut his eyes to the truth.

He was a courageous man.

In South Africa, while still very young, he witnessed an accident – when a white man ignored a stop sign and ran over a black cyclist.

He volunteered a statement to police; which the officers then wanted to him to change.

The driver was a good family man, they said, and it would all be easier if the black man was at fault.

But Colin stood his ground.

He refused to change his statement, which was an act of great bravery in 1940s South Africa.

He called it his 'Rubicon moment'.

When he knew the system was rotten beyond saving – and that he couldn't be complicit in it.

Colin later moved to Australia, where he asked his new country the same relentless questions about our own colonial history.

It was here in Australia that he founded the Centre for Comparative Genocide Studies.

And it was here that he conducted his work on the Shoah.

This was a work of history.

It was his attack on the idea that, to quote Colin, anti-Semitism arrived with Hitler from outer space in 1933.

That was never true.

The poison of anti-Semitism was spread by people; it was entrenched by institutions; it was enacted by communities.

It could be traced backwards, to actual decisions and actual causes.

As he wrote: 'this was a human event in history: it happened, it was done by people, so it must be explicable'.

Documenting this history in intense detail would be profoundly challenging for anyone; but particularly for a Jewish man.

When he started teaching the Holocaust, he would tell his students:

'You read the 1942 to 1945 materials, and I'll meet you again at the Nuremberg trials'.

It was too awful to contemplate directly, over and over again.

But Colin was a courageous man; more courageous than most; and in time he became a world leading scholar of the Shoah.

To look like he did, to truly look, was an act of heroism.

His career was a monument to truth.

The hardest, most painful, most testing truths.

Like Captain MacWhirr in Joseph Conrad's novel *Typhoon*, who said the best way to battle through a storm was take it head on: *"facing it, always facing it, that's the way to get through."*

Colin studied these truths because, if he didn't, we would lose our shot at moral progress.

Not every historian meets Colin's impossibly high bar, but the absolute primacy of the search for truth defines every serious work of history.

Without the search for the full truth, the whole truth, history doesn't make sense.

If you pull one thread from the tapestry because you don't like it, the whole picture falls apart.

How could you teach the history of China without the Long March or the Cultural Revolution or Tiananmen Square?

How could you teach the history of the United States without slavery or the Civil War or the freedom rides?

How could you teach the history of ancient Rome without the brutality and slaughter that won its Empire – and which paid for all its art, poetry, trade, architecture, and political glory?

Honesty doesn't always mean condemnation.

It doesn't mean we give up our faith in redemption or forgiveness.

These are great civilisations; some of the greatest in human history.

Now I understand the idea that there is one truth that can be pinned down is contested. Of course, there will always be judgements – even arguments.

None of us have a perfect knowledge of the past.

Sometimes the sources are too patchy.

Sometimes the bridge of time and culture is too long to cross.

When we study history, we're always making choices.

The problem is, people like the federal Education Minister Alan Tudge want to make those choices themselves.

They want the curriculum to reflect their politics more than the search for truth.

They want to import the ridiculous American history wars into Australian classrooms.

But that's not protecting kids; it's weaponising them.

We should be teaching our children that the contest of ideas is healthy.

When little kids see their parents argue, it can be frightening.

It can make them anxious.

But it's what happen next that matters.

Do they talk it out?

Does the stronger voice drown out everyone else's?

The problem is not disagreement, or contest, or different points of view – it's keeping debates civil and grounded in fact.

I have more reason than most to love Australia.

My parents were refugees from Slovenia after World War II.

They taught me to be grateful every day.

To value the freedom and riches that come with Australian citizenship.

They saw authoritarian Yugoslavia up close.

They knew it was always better to live in a country that lets you practice your faith; that lets you vote out a government you don't like; that lets you think and speak freely about the world.

I'm on the public record in my belief that Australian schools should be teaching our kids to cherish their citizenship.

That students should learn and contemplate the citizenship pledge.

It is freeing to know what is required to be a good citizen: to share democratic beliefs; respect the rights and liberties of others and obey the law.

It's pretty simple.

We no longer pledge loyalty to the Crown, nor to any political party, nor to a particular religion – but to each other: to Australia and its people.

I love this country; but love is deeper when its honest.

As the Prime Minister said in his apology speech, we shouldn't be afraid of history.

We shouldn't recoil from terrible truths.

Like our failure to listen to the children who were taken from their parents.

Who were abused and neglected and ignored.

Or the failures that Paul Keating described in his Redfern speech.

The failure to enter the hearts and minds of our First Nations people and ask, *'how would I feel if this were done to me?'*

It's what all religions teach their faithful – the golden rule – do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

And it applies to history as much as the human soul.

We examine our past behaviour as a nation because we want to be better as a people.

We face the past with courage because we are confident as a people that the truth won't break us.

I love my children more than life itself – but I don't think they're perfect.

I draw their attention to how they can do better precisely because I love them.

Some parents never pull their kids up – and could anyone honestly say those kids are better off for it?

History shows us where we have succeeded.

By most measurements, we're richer; we're freer; we're fairer.

We should be proud of these achievements.

But history also shows where we can improve as a nation.

No serious athlete, or business leader, or scientist thinks they can ignore their past performance and still become better.

They do the opposite.

They probe; they analyse; they look for points of weakness.

They're hungry for the truth, because that's what helps them improve.

Only totalitarian regimes whitewash their history.

It was Stalin who photoshopped old comrades out of his pictures.

It's totalitarians who delete the past. Who deny people the truth.

They're acting not out of strength, but insecurity.

[That's why China seeks silence about Tiananmen Square.](#)

It's why ordinary Chinese people still don't really know what happened in Beijing in 1989.

And it's why overriding One Country, Two Systems is accompanied by changes to

the way history is taught in Hong Kong.
You might have seen this in the news.

There's now a talking owl in Hong Kong schools who teaches children how they can be more patriotic citizens of greater China.
But that's not us.

Once our kids have the basics under their belts – reading, writing, maths, and science – Australian parents and teachers should aim to teach our children how to think; not what to think.

How to examine, challenge, research, test assumptions, check primary sources and make a case.

In the face of a deliberate fake news campaign from pro-Russian forces, Finland decided to teach schoolchildren, and even adults, how to spot false information. They've been doing this for years.

Especially in the age of deep fakes and deliberate misinformation, well informed, curious citizens are the antidote to social divisions caused by online actors who want to divide us.

When we study history, it's not just victory or triumph that we teach as bravery; it's also resistance and even defeat.

Resistance has formed us; just as much as the decisions of the powerful have formed us.

If you suggested to a European that teaching kids about the Shoah was giving them a 'black arm band' view of history, you'd be rightly condemned as a denier.

Yet there are people who would have us deny the impact of colonisation on the First Nations of Australia, and deny the resistance that sustains Indigenous Australians to this day.

That doesn't make us stronger.

It doesn't help us solve the problems still with us today.

We can't heal the intergenerational hurt until we face it.

Sorry is a simple word – but when it's delivered sincerely, it can carry an immense

power.

It took us too long to say it in this country.

We know that now.

And we still have so much to do to achieve true equality.

But sorry was a precondition to moving forward.

That's why Labor is committed to establishing a Makarrata Commission as part of our response to the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

This would oversee a process of truth telling – to help build a lasting foundation for national reconciliation.

When we discuss this history, it's not just colonisation and conquest. It's much richer and more interesting than that.

It's the resistance that helped form our national character.

It's the pride in our united story, when viewed through the deep history of this continent.

60,000 years of continuous culture to draw on; 60,000 of survival and knowledge to learn from.

What a unique gift.

We're at our best when we look to this history – not hide from it.

Blowing up Juukan Gorge, destroying rock shelters of exceptional value and heritage, was an act of vandalism.

And that could only happen when we fail to honour our history; when we protect it as an afterthought.

That's why teaching our whole history is so important.

Truth, reconciliation and national progress walk hand in hand.

Facing our history doesn't divide us; it unites us.

It makes us a tougher, more resilient, more mature country.

After exercise our muscles grow back stronger because of tiny tears that repair.

When we repair the tears in our national fabric, we are stronger as a nation.

When Julia Gillard announced her Royal Commission into Child Abuse, some very loud voices didn't want it to happen.

It was controversial then – but no one thinks it was a mistake now.

The truth, as painful as it was, made us better.

Colin understood this.

That's why he dedicated his career to understanding humanity's very worst moments.

Even at an enormous personal cost.

As Colin taught us, we might be tempted to close our eyes, but we're always stronger when we confront the whole truth.