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Together, we can rewrite history
Klaus Neumann

Who still remembers the leaders' debate in the first week of this long and uninspiring election campaign? In his concluding remarks, John Howard didn't talk about his vision for Australia, or the risk of a Rudd government. Instead, he talked about history: "We need to restore a proper narrative of Australian history. We can't know where to go, we can't understand where we are now without properly understanding where we've come from."

Historian Manning Clark famously began volume one of his six-volume History of Australia: "Civilisation did not begin in Australia until the last quarter of the eighteenth century." He dismissed the need to provide the continent's non-European history: "Of the way of life of these [Aboriginal] peoples before the coming of European civilisation, little need, or indeed can, be said." Not even Keith Windschuttle would say that now.

Aboriginal history has become part of the Australian story. But the histories that immigrants bring to this country remain largely excluded from that story. The tenor seems to be: "Of the way of life of these people before their coming to Australia, little need be said."

In order to integrate successfully into Australian society, immigrants are expected to learn about Australia's past and at the same time forget their own histories. They are expected to know about Gallipoli, that our first prime minister was Edmund Barton, how we held our heads high during the bodyline series. And they are expected to keep quiet at least in public about their histories. They are certainly expected to keep quiet about their wars, as if the mere mention of them would spark ethnic violence between Australian Croats and Serbs, Hazara and Pashtun, Sunni and Shiite Muslim.

When a husband and wife speak of "our history", they usually mean their joint history. Traditionally such a history includes stories about their first encounter, their courtship, their wedding, holidays, perhaps children, and more generally the ups and downs of a relationship. But the history their children learn also encompasses the individual and separate histories of their parents.

The (otherwise fraught) analogy between nuclear families and societies could make us think about the experiences, memories and histories that make up Australia's history the history that informs Australians' understanding of who they are. John Howard is right: "We can't understand where we are now without properly understanding where we've come from." But who is included in "we"? In Victoria, almost a quarter of us have come from elsewhere. Whose histories feature, and whose don't? Whose memories have a place in public? Whose journeys don't count?

Since late September, prospective Australian citizens have to sit a test. They are quizzed about Australia's history, its political system, and Australian culture and values. Immigration has prepared a resource book to help people to study for the test. According to that book, knowledge about Australia's heritage, its land and its people is important because it "helps to foster a cohesive and integrated society with a sense of shared destiny".
It makes a lot of sense for somebody from, say, Sudan, who has arrived in Australia only recently, to acquaint themselves with Australia. In order to pass the citizenship test, they have to learn about the Anzacs, about prime ministers, about the settlement of Australia by Aboriginal people and about Phar Lap.

But the resource booklet also says, and rightly so, that "Australian citizenship provides for an overriding commitment to Australia. The different experiences we bring, our diverse backgrounds and cultures, can all serve to enrich that shared commitment."

Undoubtedly, a Sudanese refugee's commitment to Australia is also informed by their own experiences: of living precariously in Egypt or Kenya, for example. They are likely to be anxious to become a full member of the Australian community because they know what it's like to be a guest in a country where you enjoy few rights and are barely tolerated.

But how do their experiences, background and culture enrich a shared commitment to Australia? Sometimes they will be asked to contribute authentic Sudanese dishes to multicultural events. For such events, they'll also be encouraged to wear dress from their native country.

There will be few occasions where they'll be prompted to talk in public about their life prior to coming here.

Yet if it's a matter of enriching a shared commitment, then others need to learn about and maybe from their experiences.

Integration is about a one-sided adjustment: the newcomers are expected to familiarise themselves with the culture of those already here, and emulate them. But adjustment could be a two-way street at least in the sense of listening to one another's histories.

We do need to understand where we've come from. But the "we" needs to include those who have come to Australia in recent times.

Who cares what the Prime Minister says by tomorrow night, he'll probably be history. But he has left us with a legacy: a belief in wonderful stories and proper narratives of Australian history.

And given that John Howard usually knows what he is doing, his remarks about Australian history in the debate last month must have been designed to appeal to a sentiment shared by the majority of viewers.

It's therefore appropriate that he, whose ideas have shaped Australian society these past 12 years, is the point of departure for a discussion about histories that could be worth telling and listening to.

This is an edited extract of the keynote address delivered by Professor Klaus Neumann, of Swinburne University, at an Adult Multicultural Education Services conference held in Melbourne on Wednesday.