

Debate on past signals healthy future

A history war needs to become a history conversation in which all Australians can engage, urges Dirk Moses

THE so-called history wars have reached a stalemate. Keith Windschuttle and his advocates decry professional historians as an elite that freezes out questioning voices. By contrast, in their book *The History Wars*, Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark argue that historians are persecuted by newspaper commentators and other history warriors.

Is there a kernel of truth in both propositions? How else do we understand a situation in which each side thinks the other dominates the public sphere and even regards itself as a victim of "reputational rape"?

Rather than fire another salvo, it is time to ask how and why debates about Australian history are seen to be war.

Traditionally, historians generally came from privileged backgrounds and were expected to serve their country by narrating the national story in uplifting terms. They were not paid to question authority. Academic freedom was tenuous. When University of Sydney history professor George Arnold Wood opposed the Boer War, he almost lost his job.

The essentially conformist role of universities continued after World War II, but change came in the 1970s and '80s when a new generation argued for an alternative vision of the humanities and social sciences. If the university is the site of innovation in science and technology, they reasoned, why should it not also be a place of innovative, even radical ideas about society, culture and politics?

Does this shift mean an intolerant ortho-

nullus in relation to the supposedly unused wasteland occupied by natives.

What, then, of the charge that professional historians constitute an elite that exercises ideological domination? To be sure, they enjoy a certain elite status because of their employment in a key institution of cultural transmission, the university. By virtue of their specialist training and research, they possess a pronounced authority to speak on historical issues. But does this mean they monopolise historical knowledge? How much power do historians wield compared with their critics?

IN fact, knowledge about our past is not solely produced by professional historians. Many of the best-selling authors of history are non-university historians, freelancers or journalists. The historical profession was largely excluded from the review of the National Museum of Australia and could do nothing about it.

If historians are so influential, why could they not prevent Australia's involvement in the Iraq war or the scuttling of Aboriginal reconciliation and other cherished projects of the Keating agenda?

Indeed, there are good reasons for thinking that the newspaper columnists who support Windschuttle fare much better in the public sphere than historians. They are read by millions each week, after all, and are echoed by talkback radio and federal government ministers. In today's media culture, the press is arguably a much more powerful institution of

cultural transmission than the university.

Where does this leave the history wars? In my view, taking account of the indigenous perspective has been a central feature of this country's moral learning process over the generation, but Windschuttle and his supporters appear to disagree.

This basic difference about our moral constitution is the buried bone of contention in the history wars. Such wars are as much about morality as about facts because we choose the way in which we frame the national drama: either to regard the dispossession of the indigenous people as an injustice that needs addressing or not to. There is no neutral body of facts to which to appeal in answering this basic question. We all have to answer it for ourselves. Every Australian has to exercise historical judgment.

For that reason, academic experts should not be the sole custodians of national memory. Likewise, prime ministers cannot summarily shut down debate because they think we should "move on".

If the national discussion about our common past is to include all Australians, then its participants need to be up-front about their politics, the power of their voice and the strengths of their opponents' arguments. A history war needs to become a history conversation.

Dirk Moses teaches history at the University of Sydney. He is editor of the book *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History* (Berghahn Books, New York), which is published next month.