

Collective Responsibility – Bridging Australia’s Past, Present and Future

Australia, Canada and New Zealand have a unique historical context where the very foundations of their nationhood were built upon the dispossession and attempted removal of indigenous presence. They are referred to as ‘settler societies’ as the colonial intention was not to exploit resources or labour but to establish permanent settlement.

In Australia, the colonial project aimed for the complete replacement of Indigenous peoples with colonial society through massacre, assimilationist policies and forced removal. As a nation, Australia needed to erase the reality of how it came to be and create a new colonial narrative. This new story of discovery, *terra nullius* and pioneering families legitimised settler claim to the land as well as grounded the sense of Australian national identity.

The continuing existence of Australian Indigenous peoples and their claim to land, brings into question the legitimacy of Australia’s national identity. If we did not discover an empty land and peacefully create Australia as we know it – then what does it mean to be an Australian? The Australia Day celebrations and unwavering pride in Captain Cook’s great ‘discovery’ masks the reality and consequences of how the nation of Australia was founded.

Differentiating the ideas of guilt and responsibility can be helpful. As the true history of Australia begins to be unmasked through truth telling and research, there are growing calls for Australia to acknowledge its colonial past and for the Australian government to take responsibility for the current effects and legacy of those colonial policies. This push for recognition and responsibility however is largely rejected as the majority of settler Australia asks: why should we feel guilty when we are not guilty? This question is crucial to the debate over historical injustice and collective responsibility. Can a nation feel guilt collectively? Should an individual feel guilt over the past actions of that individual’s state of which they are a member? How should present governments handle the injustice committed by governments of the past?

To help navigate these questions, we can look to the writings that emerged from post WWII Germany and in particular the writings of one of the most influential political scientists of the twenty-first century, Hannah Arendt. Focusing on the Holocaust, Arendt among others, grappled with similar questions of national consciousness around their nation’s past and the concepts of guilt and responsibility when applied to a collective or society. She wonderfully articulates the critical distinction between guilt and responsibility:

‘We are always held responsible for the sins of our fathers as we reap the rewards of their merits; but we are of course not guilty of their misdeeds, either morally or legally, nor can we ascribe their deeds to our own’ (*Responsibility and Judgement*, Arendt, 2003).

Arendt argues that just as we cannot take credit for our ancestors’ deeds, we cannot be guilty of their deeds. Guilt is causal - it is an emotion that is only appropriate for those individuals directly involved in the wrongdoing. It cannot have a collective application and it is not transcendent - it cannot be passed between generations. It is incorrect and harmful to attribute guilt or blame for historical injustice to present day society. Guilt is an emotion that focuses on the past and when falsely attributed, can act as a barrier to reconciliation and to open dialogue.

Discussion of Australia's colonial history has frequently been framed through a lens of guilt and blame resulting in defensive rhetoric. Decision makers and political leaders have defended Australia from this insinuated blame and thrown out attempts at redress for historic injustice by arguing: how can we be guilty of something that happened before we were born? A line of argument that has continuously worked to evade political action and shut down deeper discussion into Australia's colonial past and the legacy of injustice faced by Indigenous communities.

Responsibility however is different from guilt and, as highlighted by Arendt, it can be collective, and it can transcend generations. Responsibility connects past, present and future. Simply by being part of a society, we are connected to the history of that society. Arendt argues that as individuals, we each benefit from the society we live in and therefore we have a responsibility to improve that society. If that society was built upon past atrocities, we have a collective responsibility to make amends by challenging the lasting impact of that history and the consequent inequalities of our present-day society.

Collective responsibility can be a powerful tool for political change. It enables societies to feel sorrow and shame for past injustice, without implied blame. Removing implied blame or guilt allows for honest dialogue, acknowledgment and accepting responsibility to make amends.

If we look at Australia's history through a lens of collective responsibility, it enables and empowers non-Aboriginal Australians to acknowledge our past, better understand our present and to move forward to a better future.

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