

**NATIONAL WINNER
INDIGENOUS HISTORY**



**TAHLIA
GRAMMATOPOULOS
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BLACK ARMBAND HISTORY**

The Power of Perception: An Investigation into the Black Armband Lens and its Influence on Perceptions of Australian History

Note from the author: I would like to acknowledge and tribute the traditional guardians and custodians of this country and pay respect to their elders, past, present and future. A forewarning to the Indigenous community: this essay contains mention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have since passed.

This piece is dedicated to the storytellers of Australian history, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike; the intricacies of our past deserve to be voiced time and time again, until the story that is our nation's history becomes the foundation upon which we unite and move forward.

Australia has grappled with the notion of a single national identity since the establishment of a European presence on the 26th of January, 1788. The division between Indigenous¹ and non-Indigenous Australians has been reiterated by a distortion of the events of our past, enabled by the multiple lenses of Australian history offered by historical authorities; the power of perception is therefore critical in the acceptance of Australia's past. The Black Armband lens, popularised by the works of Henry Reynolds, has influenced the perception of Australian history to a great extent, offering a 'reinterpretation of history'² regarding frontier conflict. Though widely celebrated by some, the lens faced criticism as a 'strand of political correctness'³. Elements of this debate were contested by political leaders, and the legitimacy of the Black Armband view continued to be scrutinised as its theory influenced the outcome of the Mabo decision of 1992. Though its application decreased by the mid-2000's, the principles of Black Armband continue to influence historical debate and are present in the national dispute surrounding Australia Day. The continued speculation and historical inconsistency surrounding Australia's recognition of its past, therefore indicates the extensive influence of the Black Armband lens, and the power of those involved in its representation.

The introduction of Black Armband history was met with both immediate backlash and considerable support, indicative of its potential to become a dominant view. The widely accepted lens of Australian history prior to Black Armband was the 'three cheers view', a 'patriotic view of our past', that 'saw Australian history as largely a success'⁴, as stated by historian Geoffrey Blainey. Although limited by the minimal frontier conflict research of the time, it was suggested that this view was concealing the harsh truths about coloniser conflict, with what WEH Stanner coined 'The Great Australian Silence'⁵. However, progression within Indigenous affairs of the 60's (in particular the

¹ The terms 'Indigenous', 'First Nations' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' will be used interchangeable and are defined by the Australian government as: A person who has Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent; who also

1. Identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person; and
2. Is accepted as such by the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community in which they live (or come from).

² Edited by B. Attwood and T. Griffiths, *Frontier, Race, Nation: Henry Reynolds and Australian History*, 2009, Victoria, Australian Scholarly Publishing, pg 4

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ <http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n1673/pdf/Caroline-Beasley.pdf> - accessed 1/08/19

referendum campaign), allowed for historians to ‘challenge the view of ‘peaceful’ arrival of the British⁶ on a large scale; one such historian was Henry Reynolds, a Tasmanian researcher. Many praised his work as ‘moving beyond the accustomed frontiers of conventional historiography’⁷, and looked upon him as the historian who exposed the violence associated with settlement⁸. Blainey termed the view Reynolds supported the ‘Black Armband approach’, which ‘implies that Australia’s failures exceeded its successes’⁹ – at this time it was in relation to Indigenous peoples as well as ‘the Chinese, women, Kanakas and the environment’¹⁰. It was further suggested that this ‘guilt industry’¹¹ of blame onto the non-Indigenous population, impeded rational thinking and prevented critique of Aboriginal society¹². Reynolds states, ‘[Blainey] didn’t like that young historians wrote about race, and said that rather than celebrate Australia, we lamented it’¹³. Reynolds continued to label Blainey’s revisionist lens ‘white blindfold history’¹⁴, which was deemed a political attempt at restoring faith in traditional Australian views¹⁵. The influence of Black Armband quickly rivalled existing interpretations of history, demonstrating the power behind the claims of Reynolds, and providing grounds for further debate in practical scenarios.

The application of the Black Armband lens during the Mabo Case demonstrated its degree of power within the legal system, and the significance of the ability of key figures to alter historical perception. Reynolds was instrumental in the construction of the Mabo case, an influence to Eddie Mabo who appealed to the High Court in the interest of gaining recognition of Indigenous Native Title of Murray Island. The 1992 decision was ultimately in favour of Native Title, which sparked debate about the authenticity of the ruling. ‘White Blindfold’ perspective suggested that the High Court judges were strongly influenced by Reynolds, and that the ‘weakness’¹⁶ of the Mabo decision lay in the fact that it only represented ‘one historical idea raised by one historian, [rather than] solid proof’¹⁷. Without this ‘proof’ available due to the nature of Indigenous history¹⁸, Reynolds recognised that the judges referenced his book *The Other Side of the Frontier*¹⁹, and states that, ‘It was a case about the law. The court decided [Native Title] for all of Australia, when they could have ruled only for Murray and Darling Islands. And that is where you find the influence of the new [Black Armband] history’²⁰. Supporters claimed, ‘Reynolds’ book did not inform the *legal decision* the court made, but did

⁶ Ibid

⁷ <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/resources/pdfs/198.pdf> - accessed 3/08/19

⁸ Edited by B. Attwood and T. Griffiths op.cit Mark Mckenna pg 27

⁹ https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/RP9798/98RP05 - accessed 1/08/19

¹⁰ G. Blainey, *A Black Armband for Australia’s 20th Century?* 2004, The Samuel Griffith Society, Volume 12, Chapter 11 pg 7

¹¹ https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/RP9798/98RP05 - accessed 1/08/19

¹² Ibid

¹³ Henry Reynolds, interview with the author 14/08/19

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ <http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n1673/pdf/Caroline-Beasley.pdf> - accessed 4/08/19

¹⁶ G. Partington, 1994, *The Australian History of Henry Reynolds*, South Australia, Falcon Print, pg 2

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ The Mabo case brought to light the connections between Indigenous heritage and land, due to the traditional customs of verbal testimony and history, rendering the requirement of proving Native Title difficult to satisfy.

¹⁹ Henry Reynolds, interview with the author 14/08/19

²⁰ Ibid

influence the *historical narrative* the court told'²¹, eventually becoming the widely accepted view. This highlighted the power behind Reynolds' perception of history, and the capability of the Black Armband lens to affect the political system.

The significant extent of Black Armband's influence within politics was evident within the divisive opinions of Paul Keating and John Howard, during a period known as the History Wars. Keating made his position in support of Black Armband clear through his Redfern Park Speech of 1992, stating that the 'act of recognition' is of vital importance as 'we simply cannot sweep injustice aside'²². Howard's exclamation of his views (which can be broadly regarded White Blindfold) directly opposed Keating: 'I profoundly reject the Black Armband view of Australian history...We have been too apologetic about our history in the past'²³. He was accused of using Australian history as a 'political weapon'²⁴ to merely 'rewrite history to counter-balance Keating'²⁵, and succeeded in strongly influencing the public's perceptions of Indigenous history, signifying the power of his position and the threat he felt Black Armband posed. An advisor to Howard, controversial scholar Keith Windschuttle was adamantly opposed to the perspective presented by Reynolds, claiming his 'exaggeration' of 20,000 frontier deaths contributed to a fabrication of history, and was an estimation contrived from the application of a mathematical formula²⁶. In response, Reynolds states that 'exaggeration is neither intellectually credible nor politically astute... Keith's conclusions were based on limited research, I had no doubt what I was saying about the frontier was accurate'²⁷. Whilst Windschuttle's views have been largely discredited by subsequent research, Black Armband views undoubtedly influenced the political climate of the 90's, demonstrating the power of prominent individuals to change public opinion, and consequently affect perceptions of history for future decades.

Whilst not directly considered to still exist within Australian society, the legacy of the Black Armband lens has manifested itself into modern debates and continues to influence perceptions of Australian history. Just as the definition of Black Armband evolved from Blainey's original description, the evolution of the lens is now evident in the cases made for and against changing the date of Australia Day. The introduction of Black Armband saw an resurgence of the view that the 26th January is a Day of Mourning²⁸, which marks the start of the 'ongoing genocide' that is still felt by the Indigenous population through transgenerational trauma²⁹. This view is highly popularised by Indigenous leaders such as Noel Pearson and Dan Sultan, demonstrating the power that still exists within the influence of historical perception. It is also exemplified by the familiarity in the thousands of stories of Indigenous families: 'We call it Survival Day. Whitefellas pretty much celebrating invasion and killing our mob off—that's what it feels like for us'³⁰. In contrast, the modern reincarnation of the

²¹ Edited by B. Attwood and T. Griffiths op.cit pg 28

²² Paul Keating 1992, *Redfern Speech*

²³ https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/RP9798/98RP05 – op.cit J. Howard, 1996 - accessed 1/08/19

²⁴ <http://pre-ss-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n1673/pdf/Caroline-Beasley.pdf> - accessed 4/08/19

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Henry Reynolds, interview with the author 14/08/19

²⁸ As originally coined on the 26th January 1938

²⁹ ABC QandA, 2017, Australia Day and Families Divided – video accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kdwoQBYNLU – Dan Sultan

³⁰ Jens Korff, C. (2019). Australia Day - Invasion Day. [online] Creative Spirits. Available at: <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australia-day-invasion-day-> Warrick Wright - accessed 15/08/19

White Blindfold view is exemplified by the opinion against changing the date. Champions of this view, including Tony Abbott and Jacqui Lambie, refer to Australia Day as a time to 'grow up' and 'reflect on how far we've come as a country'³¹, regardless of race. A proportion of the Indigenous community also uphold this view, with Indigenous politician Jacinta Nampijinpa Price stating that the Change the Date campaign is a 'claim of offence, pushed upon the Australian people'³². Ironically, this division prevents the procession of peaceful discussion about Australia Day, highlighting the continued influence of the Black Armband lens and the power associated with voicing opinions on either side of the debate.

The increase of individuals in favour of changing the date, may be in part to changes within the education system that saw the Black Armband view gain more recognition in an attempt to present a 'balanced national story'³³. Reynolds states, 'There is a whole new view of history being taught, if you like, Black Armband history. A reassessment of the past clearly has an influence on the present and the future'³⁴. Whilst there is division in opinion regarding our history, many share the same sentiment; changing the date for national celebration won't resolve the issues that countless Indigenous communities face. Stan Grant states that, 'It would be pointless to move the date while we have not dealt with the legacy of terra nullius', aligning with Jacqui Lambie's stance of 'changing the date will not close the gap'. The evidence for subpar Indigenous welfare lies in the statistics³⁵, as the 2019 Closing the Gaps report states that, 'The target to close the gap in life expectancy [between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples] by 2031 is not on track'³⁶. Therefore, the conflict surrounding Black Armband and other historical views, holds power over the welfare of the Indigenous population, and is preventing improvement to Indigenous livelihood.

The Black Armband lens has undoubtedly significantly influenced perceptions of Australian history to a substantial extent, with its contested introduction to the historical community by Henry Reynolds, its contributions to the viewpoints of Australian leaders, and its critical role in the Mabo decision, a momentous legal win for Indigenous affairs. More than this, it demonstrates the power behind our perception and understanding of Australia's history; our country's narrative guides our future, and the way in which this is represented is largely controlled by the power and influence of those who tell our story, and the viewpoints they choose to take. However, the reincarnation of Black Armband in the Australia Day debate evidently suggests that without a clear consensus on Australian history, we cannot, and will not, progress as a nation. This division is preventing reconciliation, recognition and consolidation of our history, inclusive of our triumphs and our failures, which contradicts the original principals of the Black Armband: to observe Australia's history with empathy and stand in solidarity with our First Nation's People.

Word Count: 2000

Tahlia Grammatopoulos

³¹ Ibid

³² ABC the drum, 2018, Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, Don't Change Australia Day – video accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/abcthedrum/videos/dont-change-australia-day-jacinta-price/1828312657242732/>

³³ Henry Reynolds, interview with the author 14/08/19

³⁴ Ibid

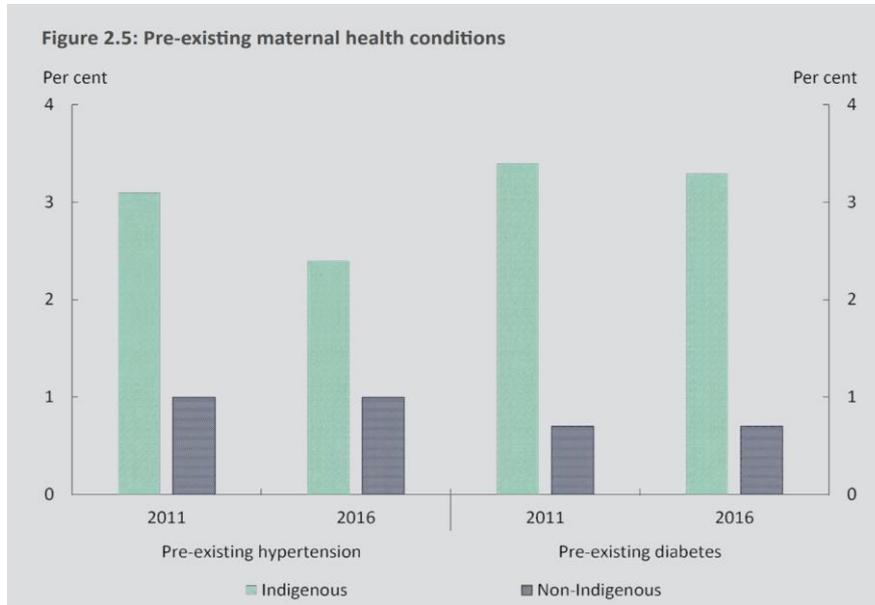
³⁵ See Appendix items 1, 2, 3 and 4

³⁶ Ctgreport.niaa.gov.au. (2019). [online] Available at: <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/ctg-report-20193872.pdf?a=1>

Appendix

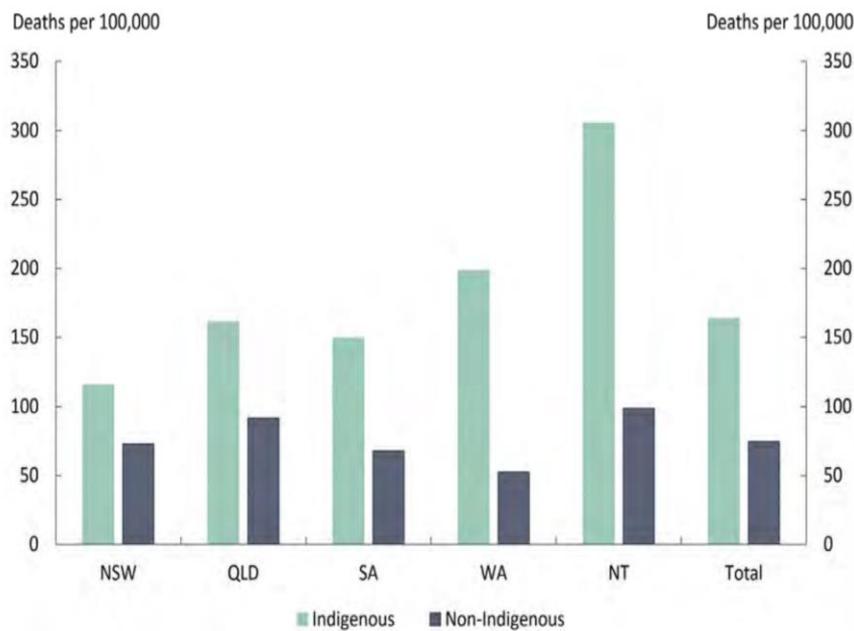
A small collection of statistics that represent the disadvantage of the Indigenous population

Appendix 1: Graph detailing the percent of pre-existing maternal health conditions in Indigenous vs non-Indigenous mothers.

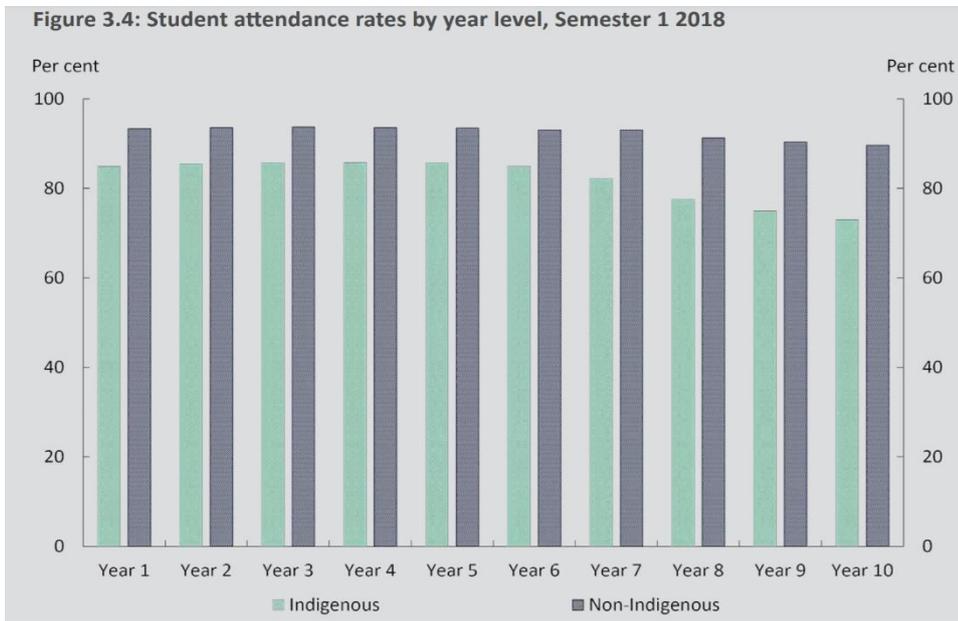


Appendix 2: Graph demonstrating the child mortality rate of Indigenous vs non-Indigenous children.

Figure 2.2: Child mortality rates by jurisdiction, 2013–17

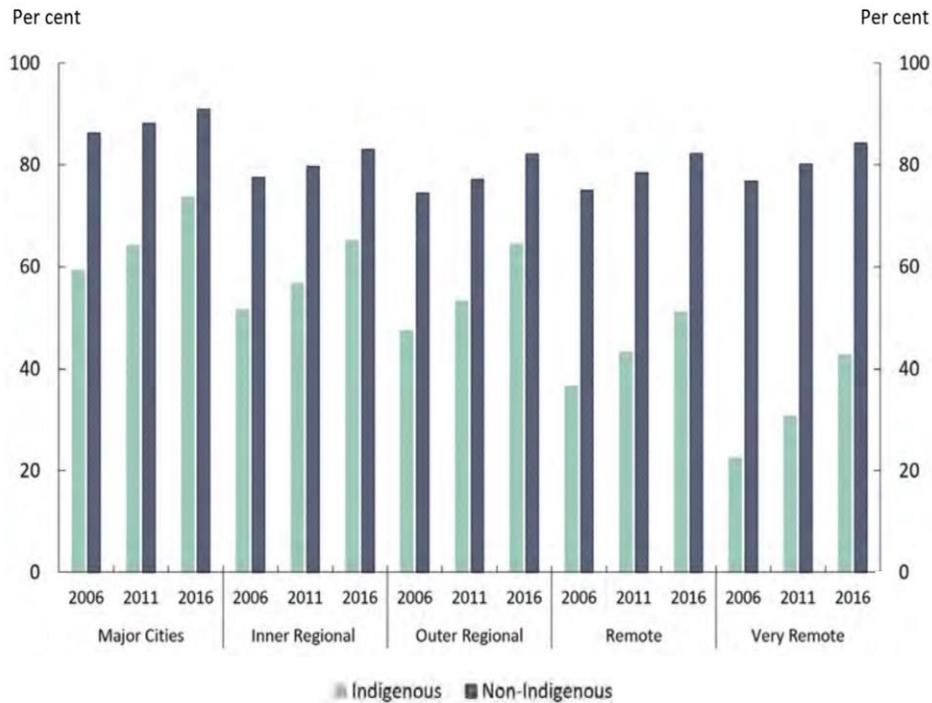


Appendix 3: Graph depicting the rate of school attendance of Indigenous vs non-Indigenous students in 2018.



Appendix 4: Graph detailing the year 12 graduation rate of Indigenous vs non-Indigenous young adults, grouped by location/remoteness.

Figure 3.11: Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate, by remoteness, 20–24 year olds



Annotated Bibliography

Primary sources:

Interview:

- Dr Henry Reynolds, phone interview: 14/08/19

Speaking with Dr. Reynolds offered me a primary insight into the lens of Black Armband history. As the person who popularised the view himself and the authority on the subject, I was able to ask a wide variety of questions pertaining to his involvement with Indigenous history, and his expert opinion on current debate. I was also able to directly ask him for responses to criticism about his work, enabling me to gain the most historically accurate and relevant information, as well as analyse multiple viewpoints efficiently. His expertise was invaluable to my research and added a unique dimension that I would not have been able to include otherwise.

Recorded Interviews:

- ABC News Australia, 2019, Stan Grant on the Battle for Australia Day – video accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwA3QKZwU10>

The research for this essay required sources about Australian past, and present; this interview provided me with an insight into the middle ground, with Stan Grant's opinion about the real issue behind Australia day. This eventually formed a significant part of my argument, in that reconciliation about our history is one of the most necessary steps in moving forward.

- ABC TV, 2001, *Australian Frontier Wars: Keith Windschuttle and Henry Reynolds on Lateline* – video accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIS2gzn3QTg>

This heated debate featured Keith Windschuttle and Henry Reynolds presented, and attempting to debunk, each other's research and opinion on frontier conflict. Not only was this valuable in representing the clash of opinion about Black Armband, but is a primary source with quotes from the historians themselves.

- ABC QandA, 2017, *Australia Day and Families Divided* – video accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kdwoQBYNLU

This debate allowed me to see multiple perspectives of the 'change the date debate' at once, as each statement built from one another. There was a large degree of representation in the speakers, with Indigenous representation, labor and liberal. It provided the solid foundations for my research on the differing opinions regarding Australia day.

- ABC the drum, 2018, *Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, Don't Change Australia Day* – video accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/abcthedrum/videos/dont-change-australia-day-jacinta-price/1828312657242732/>

Jacinta's view about the change the date debate added an interesting element to my research, as it voiced the unpopular opinion of an Indigenous person that the date should not change. I was able to use this information to draw similarities between other views on the debate in order to form my conclusion.

Speech Transcript:

- Prime Minister Paul Keating, 1992, *Redfern Speech*

This transcript allowed me to gain an insight into Keating's position on the Black Armband view. More generally, it provided information into the political climate regarding Indigenous affair at the time. It also allowed for comparison to the views of John Howard.

Articles:

- G. Blainey, *A Black Armband for Australia's 20th Century?* 2004, *The Samuel Griffith Society, Volume 12, Chapter 11* pg 7

As Blainey wrote this article himself as a reflection about his initial intentions when coining 'Black Armband history', I was able to reference it to other sources and determine that this presented the origins of the lens. It was interesting to compare his intentions when describing black armband, to the evolved nature of the lens that exists now.

Secondary Sources:

Books:

- G. Partington, 1994, *The Australian History of Henry Reynolds*, South Australia, Falcon Print

This book provided an opposing view to Reynolds' claims about Australian history, attempting to debunk the information he has presented in many of his publications. In particular, it was useful in determining the extend that Reynolds and the Black Armband view influenced the outcome of the Mabo decision.

- H. Reynolds, 2003, *The Law of the Land: New Edition*, Victoria, Penguin Books

Reynolds' perspective on the Mabo case was made clear in this book. While it primarily focused on native title, it naturally provided insight into Black Armband that allowed me to contrast with the views presented in *The Australian History of Henry Reynolds*.

- H. Reynolds, 1999, *Why Weren't We Told*, Victoria, Penguin Books

This book presents a recount of Reynolds' experience whilst conducting research into Indigenous affairs, and presents a particularly useful chapter entitled 'writing black-armband history', that details Reynolds' thoughts on the lens and his contributions to it.

- Edited by B. Attwood and T. Griffiths, *Frontier, Race, Nation: Henry Reynolds and Australian History*, 2009, Victoria, Australian Scholarly Publishing

This presented the argument 'for' Reynold's version of events, and supports him by detailing ways in which other views fault. It presents him as 'ground breaker' and therefore offers insight into the perspective of Black Armband adopters.

Websites:

- McKenna, M. (1997). *Different Perspectives on Black Armband History – Parliament of Australia*. [online] Aph.gov.au. Available at:

https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/RP9798/98RP05 [Accessed 5/08/19]

This source provided a comprehensive history of the lens of Black Armband history itself. Written by famed historian Mark McKenna, the website was a credible source of information that explored many perspectives of Black Armband that served as starting place for the rest of my research.

- **Beasley, C. (2019).** [online] [Press-files.anu.edu.au](http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n1673/pdf/Caroline-Beasley.pdf). Available at: <http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n1673/pdf/Caroline-Beasley.pdf> [Accessed 8/08/19].

Caroline Beasley offers an in-depth analysis of the changing nature of Indigenous history, particularly useful when reiterating my points about Black Armband's prevalence in today's society. She makes reference to Mabo and analyses the Mabo decision, which was critical for my essay.

- **Macintyre, S. (2019).** [online] [Kooriweb.org](http://www.kooriweb.org). Available at: <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/resources/pdfs/198.pdf> [Accessed 10/08/19].

This book presented clear information detailing the positions of various politicians during the history wars. It was therefore valuable in commenting on the different perceptions of Black Armband and how it influenced politics.

- **Nampijinpa Price, J. (2018).** *Australia Day: January 26 is not the problem*. [online] [The New Daily](https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2018/01/25/australia-day-keep-the-date/). Available at: <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2018/01/25/australia-day-keep-the-date/> [Accessed 10/08/19].

This article presented a unique and somewhat unpopular viewpoint to maintain the date of Australia day; however, upon consideration, its principles formed the basis of my conclusion.

- **Reconciliation.org.au. (2019).** [online] Available at: <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Rec-News-Should-We-Change-Australia-Day.pdf> [Accessed 12/08/19]

This magazine presented the opposite viewpoint to Jacinta Price, which allowed for analysis of the reasons behind each and added interest to the debate presented in my essay. It demonstrates the popularist view, or the view that I claim to be the modern representation of Black Armband.

- **Jens Korff, C. (2019).** *Australia Day - Invasion Day*. [online] [Creative Spirits](https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australia-day-invasion-day). Available at: <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australia-day-invasion-day> [Accessed 7/08/19]

Though this source largely championed the view of changing the date, it also demonstrated the fundamental inconsistencies in history that deem the Australia Day debate futile. This therefore supported my conclusion.

- **Ctgreport.niaa.gov.au. (2019).** [online] Available at: <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/ctg-report-20193872.pdf?a=1> [Accessed 15/08/19]

The Closing the Gap report provided the statistics present in my essay and appendix. It allowed me to support claims that without a clear consensus on Australian history, reconciliation is prevented and the Indigenous community continues to suffer.