

TEACHING AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

The national history curriculum is a dog's breakfast, says **Greg Melleuish**.

Some of the worst features of the Australian Left intelligentsia, including its parochial view of the world, its belief that it owns morality, and its excessive self-righteousness, are to be found in particular among Australian historians. These were especially manifest in the outcome of the Australian History Summit held in August 2006. The majority of the summit, faced by a proposal that sought to embed the study of Australian history in its wider context and to revive the practice of narrative history, preferred to accept the argument of those who were ideologically opposed to such an idea that it was too demanding to teach. In its place, they adopted the 'questions' approach to the study of Australian history, a dumbed down, simplistic picture of Australian history. This failure can largely be attributed to the failure of the then minister to appreciate the politics of the history profession and the difficulty involved in managing the process. Instead, by putting forward the idea that the summit represented the 'sensible centre,' legitimacy was given to those participants attending the summit who were neither of the centre nor sensible.

The history of what occurred subsequent to the summit indicates how deep the problems of the study and teaching of Australian history have become. In order to retrieve the situation, the then Prime Minister John Howard created a small committee to review what the summit and the sub-committee that succeeded it had produced. The prime minister's committee was attacked for supposed bias. What it produced, however, was less remarkable for its confusion than for any bias. It tried to make some sense out of the need to reconcile narrative history with the vague themes and issues recommended by the summit. The result was a mish mash that was quite unsatisfying, not

least because it put forward the idea that Australian history be studied with only minimum reference to the rest of the world. At that point, the Coalition government lost power in 2007.

The Labor government still wanted history to be a core element of the school curriculum. It subsequently moved away from teaching just Australian history and proposed in its place a mixture of global history and Australian history. The move away from an exclusive focus on Australian history was a positive move as the history of one's country can only be understood when it is placed in a broader context. The idea seemed to be a good one, even if responsibility for the curriculum was placed in the hands of Professor Stuart Macintyre. However, the process of curriculum development soon spiralled out of control.

What occurred was a seemingly endless round of consultations with a whole range of people, the so-called stakeholders, regarding the content of the curriculum. It developed as a bureaucratic exercise conducted by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority or ACARA. I have had some involvement in this process. I attended three sessions in 2010 at which groups composed of people from all around Australia came together and provided comments on selected aspects of the curriculum. The groups were composed of educational bureaucrats and



Professor Greg Melleuish teaches history at the University of Wollongong. This is a lightly edited extract from his latest book, *Australian Intellectuals: Their Strange History and Pathological Tendencies* (Connor Court, 2013).

school teachers, and I must admit that I came to appreciate the enthusiasm and professionalism of those teachers. Outside of history educators, there has not been very much involvement by academic historians. The scope of these sessions was limited to technical rather than intellectual issues.

When the draft curriculum was released for comment in 2010, it was attacked by a variety of people, including the federal opposition. The opposition education spokesman, Christopher Pyne, argued that it overemphasised Indigenous culture while ignoring the Magna Carta. He also criticised the emphasis on Asia at the expense of Australia's Western heritage. Conservative education commentator Kevin Donnelly made similar criticisms. Like Pyne, he was concerned about the emphasis on Asia and Indigenous perspectives instead of the European traditions that have moulded Australia's institutions. Mervyn Bendle criticised the curriculum as constituting an attack on the Australian military history, and in particular, on the ANZAC tradition.

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Nevertheless, it would be true to say that the release of the national curriculum did not ignite a new significant round of the History Wars. Given the bare bones of the curriculum document, it was difficult to discern a lot that could be described as outlandishly ideological. One could see ideological touches here and there, such as in the implication that the settlement of Australia was an imperial response to the Industrial Revolution and its view that human rights were a creation of the United Nations, but it was difficult to pin them down. A complicating factor was that a range of people have been involved in writing the different parts of the curriculum such that it lacked an overall coherence and consistency. There were problems with the document but they were not ones that were amenable to a History Wars style response.

The problems were structural in nature and related to the attempt to have a world history

approach while at the same time emphasising the national history of Australia. These can be seen in two very practical matters:

- How does one decide what to put in and what to leave out?
- How does one balance the need to create some sort of narrative with the need to look at some issues in depth?

These are important issues as the time that can be devoted to history in a 'crowded' curriculum is limited. At every stage of the process from the 2006 summit onwards, teachers have complained that the amount of material proposed to be taught is too great. They have also indicated that they prefer to teach about some matters in depth. It is interesting that some of the major complaints about the new curriculum came from the History Teacher's Association, on the ground that the curriculum covers too much material, and from some of the state education departments. The real problem for any history curriculum, especially in an age in which historical knowledge has exploded, is to have clear principles regarding the selection of material. If there is only a limited amount that the curriculum can cover how are we to decide what those topics should be? Unfortunately, there was no discussion of what principles should be applied to achieve this aim.

Instead, the curriculum grew like Topsy in response to particular criticisms and specific concerns of some individuals and groups. As mentioned previously, one constraining element was the need to comply with the Indigenous, Asian and sustainability foci.

As an interested observer, the development of the curriculum looked to me like an example of that organised chaos of which only bureaucracies are capable. One major issue relates to the need to have both a general narrative, described as an overview, and a series of areas of more intensive study, or what are called depth studies. The overviews became essentially a list of events, and one might well ask if these lists provide students with a coherent map of the past. The depth studies are in many ways a strange collection of topics, and it is conceivable that a student could come out of studying history at high school with

knowledge about a disconnected, even bizarre, set of places and historical periods. The depth studies include Polynesian expansion across the Pacific, the Khmer Empire, the Mongols, and the Black Death, and a comparison of a nineteenth century Australian city with an Asian city.

Australian history is covered in two ways. It forms the basis of the primary school history curriculum. At high school, it is only really covered in the final two years of compulsory schooling, still in tandem with world history. There is a substantial concentration in the Australian history depth studies on World War I and Australia's involvement in other twentieth century wars. The battle for Indigenous rights, although placed alongside other civil rights movements, constitutes another depth study. The feminist movement, along with Australian popular culture (Kylie and AC/DC studies?), is also there along with a study of the environmental movement. What is missing is much consideration of Australian political history, and there is hardly anything on the economic development of the country.

My major criticism of the National History Curriculum is not that it is excessively ideological, although there are issues in that area, but that it is a dog's breakfast. And this again raises the important issue about what the sort of history being taught to students in a country like Australia should look like. We inhabit national entities that are part of a global community.

It is highly laudable that our students should have an understanding of the way in which human history has developed over the past few thousand years. We need to understand and appreciate our national history. How do we do it?

In one sense, this also goes back to the role that history is meant to play in the curriculum as a compulsory area of study. Why is it there? This issue has not really been addressed in Australia. Of course, good reasons can be given: I think that they have to do with providing students with the opportunity to explore human beings and human behaviour and to think deeply about what it means to be human. I have made a modest attempt to suggest a principle that could be used as a guide to deciding what should go into such a curriculum. It is what I term the 'significant past,' which is to

say the past that is important for a particular country or nation. The point is that we cannot teach everything. We can only teach that which is significant and which has relevance for students. Such an approach goes back to the dawn of historical writing as Herodotus conducted his inquiries into those matters that helped to explain the Persian Wars. To me, this means providing students with an appreciation of the broad set of factors that have shaped human history, from climate to economics to warfare to ideas and beliefs to the role of individuals. It would mean focusing on those parts of history that enable students to understand how the nation which they are part of came to be the way that it is. In the case of Australia, this means that there would be little taught, for example, about either Africa or South America. Europe and East Asia would loom large and North America would have a place. Of course, Australian Indigenous history would have its proper and rightful place.

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But, unlike the current curriculum, there would need to be an emphasis placed on Australia's European, and specifically British, heritage. It is simply foolish to mandate Indigenous history and the study of Asia and to leave out the European dimension of Australian history. They all have to be there. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students in the past have not taken kindly to an excessive emphasis on Indigenous history, especially when the same material has been taught at a number of levels. One thing that the new curriculum does is to eliminate this sort of repetition.

Students have also tended to find Australian history 'boring' in comparison to the history of other places. After all, the history of non-Indigenous Australia has largely been the story of economic development and the peaceful growth of democratic institutions. It has sometimes been the complaint that the problem with Australian history is that it does not have a revolution. This

probably explains why students are generally attracted to the study of Australia's role in the wars of the twentieth century and why this aspect of Australian history is given such prominence in the curriculum.

Ultimately, how the curriculum will be taught will depend on the teachers themselves and not, as some suggest, on those who have been nominally in charge of the process. The curriculum sets out

the bare bones of what is to be taught. It is up to the teachers to put the flesh on it. There will be those who will use it as an opportunity for putting a partisan case to the students, but there are also many teachers with high professional standards. The real problem will come when teachers with inadequate historical training are put in front of a class that needs to be convinced that the study of history is worth the effort.

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