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Media Centre

Speech

Minister Bishop's Address to The Australian History Summit Dinner 16 August 2006

Forgetting Our Past, Failing Our Future: The Teaching of Australian History

Last year Roy Eccleston, a journalist at *The Australian* newspaper, returned home after four years living and working in the United States.

In the US, his young son learnt the basics about important Americans in first grade – from George Washington to Martin Luther King. His daughter's fourth grade history book traced the national story from native Americans through the revolutionary war and onwards.

Since returning to Australia, Mr Eccleston's children have looked at how their suburb has changed over time. They've done some work on a family tree. But, as Roy lamented earlier this year, 'a structured, consistent study of the nation's history' was nowhere to be found.

When he expressed his concerns to the local school principal he was told not to worry. His children wouldn't be alone in their ignorance.

Parents all around Australia are worried that their children will grow up with virtually no understanding of their country's history. Unfortunately, they have good reason to be.

As Tony Taylor says in his paper for tomorrow: 'By the time they reach leaving age, most students in Australian schools will have experienced a fragmented, repetitive and incomplete picture of their national story'.

Many teachers at both primary and secondary school level are left floundering in a 'local patchwork curriculum where Australian history is often regarded as an optional extra'.

The picture Tony paints is one of a lack of coherence and continuity in the teaching of Australian history in our schools. The time has come, as the Prime Minister said in January this year, for a 'root and branch renewal'.

I want to see a renaissance of Australian history in our schools. And I want our Summit participants – the sensible centre of the history debate – to help me lead it.

I believe there is a body of historical knowledge which should be taught to all Australian students. And I want you to help define it.

Yes, there will be controversy but I would hope we can find agreement on the main currents and big themes in our national story.

Big themes like the role of Enlightenment values such as scientific progress, religious freedom and secular government in shaping our colonial experience, as John Gascoigne has written about. The development of parliamentary democracy, up to and including Federation, should be taught. So too should the impact on our national consciousness and social institutions of involvement in global conflicts – including the First and Second World Wars.

We have a rich and unique national story. We have to ask ourselves why so few of our children know it.

Whatever the reasons, the situation is not good enough. I see this as an issue of national importance. I believe it's time to fix it.

The facts of our founding and settlement give rise to an inspirational story. Whatever the rights and wrongs of Australian history, it's ours and we should care about it. To know who we are and where we are going, we must understand where we came from.

Tomorrow's Australian History Summit has two purposes. The first is to seek advice and guidance on ways in which the Government might strengthen the teaching of Australian history in schools, and encourage a greater number of students to open up the book on Australia's past.

Secondly, Summit participants will be asked to broadly sketch the essential narrative – the facts and details – of Australian history with which every student should become familiar during their schooling. In other words: What in Australian history should every school student learn about?

Armed with ideas from the Summit, the Government will consult widely with the relevant bodies with an interest in the teaching of Australian history on a road-map of renewal.

Importantly, I'd like tomorrow's summit to move us beyond the sound bites and bitterness that too often characterised the so-called History Wars. Debate is healthy. But too often in the last decade the extremes in the history debate obscured the sensible centre and left others – not least our children – to simply switch off.

I believe that students should be given a good grounding in key dates, facts and events of Australian history. They should be organised within the framework of a narrative or story because, as Greg Melleuish writes in his paper, 'that is the easiest way of making sense of events'.

An element of chronology – a before and an after – is important because how else are we to interpret and analyse our national story?

The British historian, Simon Schama, perhaps his generation's greatest populariser of national history, put it well when he said: 'We seem to be positively wired to understand our connection with the past through chronology and narrative. To resist them is to make the work of inspiring the young to connect with their ancestry much harder, not easier.'

I think most fair-minded people – whether left or right, Labor or Liberal – can also agree that there is much of which we should be proud of in our history.

From convict dumping ground to responsible government in a few generations. The highest living standard in the world and a pioneer in political and social reform by the end of the 19th century. The first nation to come into being following a democratic vote. A beacon of hope that has integrated people from all corners of the world. A country prepared to embrace change and globalisation to ensure a prosperous future.

But let me assure everyone that we are not in the business of producing some form of official history.

The creation of an official history would be counterproductive. It would lead to further attempts to politicise our nation's past, and would create a focal point for those with strong political interpretations of Australia's past to periodically attempt to hijack the teaching of our history. We can not allow the nation's past to be rewritten in the service of a partisan political cause.

When I say that the Australian story is overwhelmingly a positive one I do not seek to obscure the failings of the past but to restore a sense of balance and perspective to the national story.

I want to echo what the Prime Minister said in January about the importance of indigenous history as part of the whole national inheritance. We need to think seriously and speak honestly about how we bring this inheritance to life and weave it into the national story.

Recent decades have seen increased attention to indigenous history. But as Ann Curthoys has written, it seems that 'historians have paid a high price, losing their earlier ability to provide unifying national narratives'. We must rediscover such unifying narratives – to build the bridge between indigenous history and the rest of the national story.

At the same time, we must guard against history becoming shoe-horned into a political agenda in which versions of earlier radical doctrines become the new orthodoxy. We all know how children hate stale orthodoxies.

History is not peace studies. History is not social justice awareness week. Or conscious-raising about ecological sustainability. History is history, and shouldn't be a political science course by another name.

This is a belief I know Bob Carr shares and his role in reinstating Australian history as a key subject in NSW provides a model for what I believe needs to happen on a national scale.

I intend to explore ways for the Australian Government to encourage state education authorities and all schools to make the teaching of Australian history a critical part of their jurisdiction's syllabus.

We should seriously question, for example, the experiment of mushing up history in Studies of Society and the Environment (or SOSE). There is a growing body of evidence that this experiment is failing our children.

Again Tony Taylor's work highlights some of these concerns. He points out that 'it is frequently very difficult to discern in several of the curriculum documents where exactly the teaching of Australian history may be found'.

Some of the structural flaws in the Studies of Society and the Environment model were highlighted by the report on school history which the Government released in 2000. They included:

- A common practice of allocating unqualified or scarcely-qualified teachers to take Studies of Society and the Environment classes which included history;
- A lack of subject leadership in schools with the demise of what we used to call Subject Masters, replaced by heads of generic Key Learning Areas; and ultimately
- Students emerging with no clear idea of what historical study entails.

This is a challenging issue. The Australian Government does not run state government schools. The curriculum and what happens inside Australia's classrooms remains the jurisdiction of the various State and Territory governments.

We want to work with schools to rebuild the teaching of Australian history at all levels of schooling. And we want this to be a partnership between the State and Territory governments, and the Australian Government.

We start, however, with a strong view that Australian history should be a compulsory, stand alone subject during some period of high school in Australia.

Let me also respond to the suggestion that tomorrow's history summit is nothing more than an 'elite preoccupation'. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The study of history produces marketable skills. As Bob Carr has said, it demands collecting information, organising that information, presenting it, debating it, and they're the skills required in a so-called Information Age.

More than that, history is a rich source of skills for life, in this or any age.

This was brought home to me in reading Imre Salusinszky's article in *The Weekend Australian* last Saturday. He highlighted the way Mike Goodwin, a young history teacher from Mackay in Queensland, is helping his students grow as individuals by organising tours of places like Gallipoli and the Thai-Burma railway.

As Mike says, by reflecting on the sacrifices of past generations, his students start to understand that if their mobile phone doesn't work it's not the end of the world. Not a bad lesson for a young person in 2006.

There are many wonderful history teachers out there doing exciting things to get students interested in Australian history. Tomorrow, we too must think creatively about how we get young Australians interested in their country's history. We need to think how we bring Australian history to life not just for the best students but for all students.

I think the opportunities are enormous using the technologies of today and drawing on the people and resources of our universities and great public institutions like the National Museum, the National Library and the Australian War Memorial.

An understanding of Australian history is a core part of what it means to be an active and informed citizen.

In this year, the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Willem Janszoon's *Duyfken* – the first known European arrival on the coast of Northern Australia – and the 150th anniversary of responsible government being established in New South Wales - it is timely that the Australian Government placed history back on the educational map. Ladies and gentlemen, the Government stands ready to breathe life back into the teaching of Australian history.

<http://www.dest.gov.au/ministers/media/bishop/2006/08/b001170806.asp>