

Counterpoint

[on ABC Radio National](#)

14 August 2006

What should Australian students know about our history? (transcript available)

Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop says that there is too much political bias and not enough pivotal facts and dates being taught in schools. She's called an Australian History Summit for later this week and asked Greg Melleuish to prepare a paper arguing for a narrative approach to Australian history teaching. Nick Ewbank, president of the History Teachers' Association of Australia has been invited to participate for a teacher's perspective.

Guests

Gregory Melleuish

Associate Professor of History and Politics at University of Wollongong

Nick Ewbank

President, History Teacher's Association of Australia

Julie Bishop

Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training

Transcript

Michael Duffy: Let's start today's program with the past rather than the future. Julie Bishop is the Minister for Education, Science and Training and I interviewed her earlier today. After listening to her you'll hear from Greg Melleuish and Nick Ewbank. They're both attending this Thursday's History Summit. I started by asking Minister Bishop what is wrong with history teaching in Australia.

Julie Bishop: Currently we are told that a significant number of Australian students will leave school with a fragmented, incomplete view, at best, of Australian history. In many states it has been relegated to an optional extra and in some states it's not compulsory at any level, and so the Australian government believes that we should rebuild Australian history study in Australia's schools.

Michael Duffy: If I could just be the Devil's advocate for a moment; why does that matter? I mean, they're studying other good subjects, I assume, like science or French.

Julie Bishop: We need to have pride in our own history. This is the story of our country, and if students are able to understand where we have come from as a nation, they'll better understand the present and be better able to plan for the future, and it will assist them in becoming more informed citizens. After all, shortly after leaving school in year 12, young Australians are required to vote, and so it helps inform our citizenry.

Michael Duffy: Can you give me an example of some of the sorts of things that most of them don't know which you would like them to know?

Julie Bishop: I think there have been a number of examples presented in the media where they've had vox pops and the like, where Australians are struggling to nominate the first prime minister, they're struggling to explain what happened in 1901 when we became a federation, very little understanding of post-world war two migration, little understanding of why we went to war in the first and the second world wars. So a whole range of issues surrounding our own national history that seems to be forgotten. I'd like to see history as a key part of the curriculum in schools across Australia.

Michael Duffy: I read somewhere that you've been conducting your poll. I think you've been asking what year Captain Cook sailed up the east coast, is that right?

Julie Bishop: I've asked a number of questions, not only in my office but generally, in fact, in schools that I've been visiting in recent weeks—they've been conducting Australian history tests. So in a sense the convening of a history summit has engendered considerable debate and interest across Australia. I'm hearing of parents that are asking their children when they get home from school questions about Australian history, and I think that's a positive thing. We need a renaissance in the teaching of Australian history.

Michael Duffy: We've read that the amount of history that's taught varies greatly from state to state. Where it is taught properly? Do you think it's taught well or is it biased?

Julie Bishop: We have had a paper prepared by Associate Professor Tony Taylor for use at the summit to be held this Thursday, and he has set out what is being taught and how. That gives rise to the conclusion that it's very fragmented, very incomplete and not taught in a number of states as a stand-alone subject. In NSW...that seems to be the only state that has turned the tide in relation to the teaching of Australian history, and my reading of the curriculum is that it is taught well, so I'll be looking forward to hearing from historians and educators from NSW at the summit.

Michael Duffy: In general terms, if it came about that what's being done in NSW now was to be done in other states, would that be a fairly satisfactory outcome, do you think?

Julie Bishop: Well, I'm waiting to hear from the experts. We've invited leading historians and commentators and history teachers and educators to discuss ways forward for our agenda to rebuild Australian history. I'd like to hear from them as to where there is best practice, if it exists, and find ways to work with the states to ensure that every Australian school student gets at least a basic understanding of Australian history by the end of their schooling.

Michael Duffy: I guess the school syllabus has traditionally been more of a state matter than a federal one. Why is the federal government stepping in now?

Julie Bishop: Essentially, we believe that Australian history should be taught as a standardised subject in Australian schools and it's apparent that that's not happening, so the Australian government is showing leadership in this regard, working with the states to find ways to ensure Australian history does have a critical role to play in school curriculum. I've written to the state and territory ministers seeking their advice on whether they have confidence in their jurisdiction's curriculum to adequately deliver Australian history to every school student. So I will work with the states and territories on this issue.

Michael Duffy: Presumably the states and territories that aren't doing much like it that way, they're doing it for a reason. Who do you think should have the upper hand if it comes to a disagreement over that?

Julie Bishop: That's why we're holding a summit. I want to hear from the commentators, the educators, the teachers about their experience with the teaching of Australian history in their schools. And depending upon the findings of the summit, then I will work with states and territories to ensure that we can make Australian history an essential part of the curriculum. So first things first; we'll get through the summit, I'm sure it's going to be a very interesting experience for all those involved, and then I can consider ways that the federal government can encourage the state education authorities to make the teaching of Australian history this critical part of the syllabus. Look, this could be about making history a central part, it could be about improving the resources available to teachers, there are a whole range of issues that we'll be looking at.

Michael Duffy: The government has been in power for a decade, why the quickening of interest now?

Julie Bishop: Well, I don't think that's the case. In fact, a few years ago there was a survey and a study done on the teaching of Australian history. The Prime Minister raised it again in his Australia Day address this year, and I've been the minister for six months now and it's a matter of importance, I believe, to ensure that we can rebuild our interest in Australian history, and hence that's why we've called a summit to be held this Thursday in Canberra.

Michael Duffy: And what about non-Australian history, Minister, which is also not terribly popular these days? Is that of as much concern?

Julie Bishop: You mean the inadequate teaching of, say, European history or..?

Michael Duffy: That's right. The Industrial Revolution, for example.

Julie Bishop: I believe that history as a subject has been downgraded. I'm informed that in some states they have merged ancient and modern history into one subject. Now, I took both subjects when I was at school and the teaching of ancient history was completely different to the teaching of modern history, so I am concerned that you could merge both concepts into one subject. Essentially across Australia states are teaching history through...if they are teaching it, through subjects like 'Time, Continuity and Change' and being taught through the prism of, say, themes such as social justice or ecological sustainability or peace. I believe history should be taught as history.

Michael Duffy: We'd better leave it there, Minister. Thanks for your time.

Julie Bishop: My pleasure. Thank you, Michael.

Michael Duffy: That's Julie Bishop, Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, and I talked to her earlier today about the government's History Summit which, as you heard, will be held this week. I now welcome Nick Ewbank and Greg Melleuish to the program. They're both going to the conference and Greg will be giving a paper on what people should be taught about our history. Greg is Associate Professor of History and Politics at the University of Wollongong, and Nick is a history teacher in the ACT and president of the Australian History Teachers' Association.

Welcome to the program. I'd like to start by running through some of the issues the Minister talked about to get your views. Nick, what do you think is wrong with the teaching of Australian history in schools?

Nick Ewbank: I think the Minister in broad brush terms has given a reasonable overview. I think, depending on which state or territory we're talking about, there is a degree of fragmentation or a lack of coherence perhaps in the teaching of history, particularly Australian history, across a number of schools. I think that was the key issue.

Michael Duffy: I think Geoffrey Blainey said recently that history teaching goes through fashions. Can you tell us how does the situation today compare with what it was like, say, in the 70s, and any reason for the change?

Nick Ewbank: Well, I experienced the 70s from the other side of the school desk, of course, as a student, so my perceptions are a little bit different from the 1970s. I think in the late 1960s and early 70s there was a move to emphasise skills which meant that it was possible to approach the teaching of history through what some people would describe as themes 'revolutions', 'peace', 'human rights', these sorts of things, which was a move away from the straight kings and queens narrative approach which some of your listeners will have experienced as the mainstay of their history studies.

Michael Duffy: And what do you think of that? Do we need something of a return to a more narrative approach?

Nick Ewbank: I think there is a great value in approaching things with a clear chronological structure because it's the easiest way to make sense of things, but also chronology or, if you like, a time-based structure is often the clearest way to make sense of the causation. In other words, why things happened. I think that theme studies have value as well. The comparison, for example, of the French and the Russian Revolutions, which is a bit of a classic way of looking at a theme, has merit in itself, but I think also helps students understand it's clear to get a chronological or a narrative approach right.

Michael Duffy: Greg, in your university work I imagine that you would see students who've come through the NSW mandatory syllabus. What do you think of it?

Greg Melleuish: Well, my daughter is doing year 10 this year. A lot of them have come out of it with quite negative feelings towards history, and I'm told it does affect their selection of history as a subject after year 10.

Michael Duffy: Is that because of the negativity?

Greg Melleuish: It's because of the negativity, yes.

Michael Duffy: Can you give us an example of that? Is it, for example, the choice of subjects or the way those subjects are treated, or both?

Greg Melleuish: I think they just don't find it particularly interesting, is the feedback that I've got.

Michael Duffy: That's a bit different from negativity, isn't it?

Greg Melleuish: It's not bias or negativity, it's more...well, it's negative in the sense that it doesn't excite them.

Michael Duffy: I see, they're negative towards history in general. But do you feel the history they're being taught provides a negative view of Australia's past?

Greg Melleuish: When I look at the year 10 syllabus in NSW I think that it has something of the crisis that the teaching and the study of Australian history Australia generally has in so far as it seems to, although it is put in chronological order, it seems to peter out towards the second half of the 20th century. My view of the reason for this is that one of the things that they don't deal with are the major economic reforms of the 1980s. When you go and look at the text books they talk about the reforms of Whitlam and how Whitlam did this, and they talk about social agendas, and yet these are kids who are living in a society in which perhaps the major thing that's fashioned their society were the Hawke-Keating reforms of the 1980s and what's followed since, and yet this is not given any coverage at all in their history.

Michael Duffy: That's a very interesting point. The history they're getting, in other words, is a history that's over, the end of history almost, but as you say, it's still going of course. Nick, do you find anything like that in your experience?

Nick Ewbank: No, and I'd actually take just a slight issue with Greg on this because while I think it's true to say that the impact of the NSW mandatory syllabus on Australian history numbers at year 11 and 12 has been not so great, I think the study of history in NSW schools generally in year 11 and 12 is quite strong. Ancient history, for example, for a variety of reasons, has actually blossomed in the last five or ten years. So I wouldn't necessarily agree that there's a negative attitude toward history in general. I think there are some issues with a mandatory syllabus which are having an effect on enrolments in year 11 and 12 for Australian history. I think as far as Greg's point about the economic reforms of the 1980s, I think Greg has actually touched on a very key point here and that's that the history that we're teaching our students has got to appeal to them, or in a sense it's had to be relevant to them. It's all very well to teach students about Vietnam or Whitlam and so on, these are important issues, but it's also important to bring it back to the context in which they're operating as well.

Michael Duffy: Greg, can I ask you...you've written a paper for the conference, can I ask, just very generally, what are you proposing in that?

Greg Melleuish: What I propose in the paper is that there should be three ways of dealing with Australian history. One is a narrative chronological approach to what I just describe as public events. The second is that these events be placed in a context of basically global or world history at various points so that students don't understand Australian history in isolation. And the third thing which I've recommended is that as part of the teaching in Australia that students, in order to develop their sympathies and empathy towards historical figures, look at a certain amount of everyday life in Australia.

Michael Duffy: They're not getting that right now?

Greg Melleuish: I don't know if they're getting the global context in exactly that way. I'm not too sure about the everyday life, but I think we've got to...one of the things that worried me as I was writing the paper was that if we have more Australian history, does this mean that other forms of history are going to suffer as a consequence? You need the other forms of history to really provide the background, the contrasts, the comparisons with Australian history. That's why I think that we need to ensure that there is a context, a much broader context...not just a

European context, a global context, looking at places like China, the Islamic world and so on, because we're not just citizens of a democratic Australia. The children that are now...they're living in a globalised world. I hate to use the term 'globalised citizens' or something like that, but we fail them if we don't provide the wider international context as well.

Michael Duffy: Nick, can I ask your views on the proposals that Greg's making?

Nick Ewbank: Certainly the outline that Greg has just given, those three points, I find all of them highly commendable. I think there's a good balance there between doing the specific or the parochial, between achieving the national story to the degree that you can achieve a national story, and also of course placing our students in the context of world history which, as Greg has outlined, is very important.

Michael Duffy: Greg, this issue of political bias which gets talked about a lot in the debate, is that really a big part in all this or is it only a small part?

Greg Melleuish: I think in what we're doing at this national macro level it isn't been an issue because we're not specifying the way in which history will be taught in terms of particular biases. We're looking more at very large questions. Where political bias would come in would be more at a micro level, I would have thought. The way that topics are taught, the emphasis that is placed on various parts of the topics and so on. I think the way to avoid bias is to have an open account of history, which I've tried to do in some of my proposals, is that we recognise, yes, there are different interpretations and that part of what history is about and part of what being a democratic citizen is about is using one's judgement to decide which interpretation one believes to be the most plausible. Not necessarily true or false but the most plausible.

Michael Duffy: Nick, let's say as a result of the summit that it was decided to increase the teaching of Australian history. Do we have the teachers, the properly educated teachers that could go out and do that straight away?

Nick Ewbank: I think that's almost a sort of a numbers question and I don't have the hard evidence in front of me, and of course hard evidence is important for history. I would suspect not. I think that there are too few fully trained history teachers to cope if Australian history became mandatory, for example, across all high schools across all of Australia—so that will obviously be another issue which hangs off what Thursday decides.

Michael Duffy: Nick, do you think if all that happened was that what's going on in NSW now started to happen in other states, would that be a satisfactory step forward for you or would you hope for more?

Nick Ewbank: I think I would say that I would hope for something different rather than necessarily more. There are issues surrounding the mandating of a syllabus and then testing in the way that NSW has done, and I think that Greg has identified some of the negative impacts that that's had on the later years of schooling in terms of numbers in history. I would think that an outcome which identified a core curriculum and maybe looks at issues of mandating and whether or not that's tested, I think that's probably where Thursday might go, that would be my guess, and of course I'm looking forward to the discussions. But I'm not sure that I would be wholly comfortable with NSW's approach, but obviously I'm coming from an ACT perspective.

Michael Duffy: Just as a matter of interest, what happens in the ACT?

Nick Ewbank: In the ACT history largely exists as part of studies of society and environment, and the ACT curriculum documentation allows a reasonable amount of latitude to schools to make decisions based on the wants of their community as to what is actually studied in each individual school, which makes it quite difficult to come up with a hard and fast statement. Certainly all students would see some Australian history in their four years of high school, because of course our high schools are 7 to 10. But there would also be elective history which might be American, it might be ancient, it might be world history in all schools as well, but it's very hard to make a hard and fast statement about what's actually happening.

Michael Duffy: Very briefly, can I ask each of you what you think of the very notion of a national curriculum. Is it a good or a bad idea? I understand things that have happened in the UK can tell us lessons about this. Greg?

Greg Melleuish: Well, I don't know if a national curriculum...if one is a good federalist, one always has suspicions of anything that's national because you want to see different states being allowed to do their own thing, competing against each other and so on, but on the other hand it's a good idea to have broad parameters and perhaps allowing diversity within those parameters.

Michael Duffy: Nick, we're almost out of time, but can I get your response to that too?

Greg Melleuish: I'd actually, to a degree, agree with Greg there. I think there is a large case to be made for the study of local history or parochial history depending on your point of view, and therefore a document which mandates that all year 10 students on Friday afternoon will be doing Captain Cook I think is probably bound for failure. But I think there is also merit in having a broadly defined set of understandings that students will come across in their four years of secondary schooling.

Michael Duffy: A bit of both. Thanks very much to both of you for coming on the program.

Further Information

[Australian History Summit](#)

The Australian History Summit will be held in Canberra on 17 August 2006



Monday 4pm
(6pm WA) repeated **Tuesday 9pm**

Presented by
[Michael Duffy](#)

 [Counterpoint](#) | [Radio National](#) | [Programs A-Z](#)

©2006 ABC | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Conditions of Use](#)

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/counterpoint/stories/2006/1712562.htm>