

## Heed history teachers, not the ideologues

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**This week's summit is a chance to form a new charter for history, writes Stuart McIntyre.**

TWENTY-TWO historians, educators and friends of history will meet in Canberra on Thursday for a summit on Australian history. The declared purpose is to revive the subject in our schools, give it a secure place in the curriculum and ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn about their country's past. Few would question such objectives.

But is that all? Some historians are troubled by an aphorism from ancient history. Roughly translated, it warns to beware of Canberrans bearing gifts. The summit has been convened by federal Education Minister Julie Bishop following a call by Prime Minister John Howard on Australia Day for a "root-and-branch renewal of the teaching in Australian history in our schools".

The Prime Minister's call came in an address lauding "The Australian Achievement", and he could not resist the temptation to congratulate his Government for redefining it. Thus he rejoiced that "the divisive phoney debate about the national identity" had been "finally laid to rest", and then set out his own position in that very debate.

His call for "a structured narrative" of Australian history to replace what he described as the present "fragmented stew of 'themes' and 'issues' " seemed to betray a belief that only one story can be told and that it should be drilled into all young Australians.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the choice of the 22 participants has attracted considerable comment.

Sceptics have noted that Greg Melleuish will tell the summit what lessons in Australian history should be taught. His previous association with *The Australian's* prosecution of the history wars, his regular contributions to

the Centre for Independent Studies and his prominent place in a polemical passage of the Prime Minister's Australia Day address on history are unpropitious.

Then there is the inclusion of Geoffrey Partington, a particularly zealous history warrior. , as well as the piece in *The Age* (August 7) from John Roskam of the Institute of Public Affairs. For more than two decades the institute has sought to impose its own closed version of history on Australian students and to prohibit any questioning of it.

But when journalists asked me for my reaction to the Prime Minister's speech, I emphasised my support for his call. So did most of my colleagues.

We have long been calling attention to the neglect of history in the school curriculum. Back in 1994, when I chaired the inquiry into civics education, we lamented the displacement of history by vocational training. Out of that inquiry came the Commonwealth Government's Discovering Democracy program and it, in turn, spawned a National Inquiry into School History, conducted by Tony Taylor from 1999 to 2001.

Some of his recommendations were implemented, but the underlying needs — a clearer place for history in the curriculum, better training for history teachers and more support for them in schools — remain unmet.

I am therefore delighted that the summit will work with an overview paper prepared by Tony Taylor and Anna Clark.

Unless our universities train history teachers and schools employ them, there is little chance of remedying the accumulated neglect. The teaching profession is blamed for circumstances over which it has no control. The history teachers' associations of the various states have flown the flag with remarkable dedication despite institutional neglect and in the face of a pernicious campaign waged in *The Australian* that detects postmodernism and moral relativism in even the mildest forms of critical inquiry.

Another danger is the well-meaning advice of enthusiasts for history who assume their own enthusiasms are shared by all students. It is all very well to list the names and facts that every young Australian must know, another entirely to engage the interest and capture the imagination of a class charged with rote learning of a compulsory curriculum.

I yield to no one in my conviction that we should teach the story of Australian Federation, but I know from experience that it is not an easy lesson to teach 14-year-olds. Perhaps it should be a condition of anyone who wishes to prescribe the inclusion of the non-Deakinite free trade tradition in the syllabus that they try it out themselves first.

A precondition for the success of the summit will therefore be to listen to the informed advice of the school teachers and respect their expertise.

The assault on the teaching and writing of history has been a staple of New Right politics, and it would be naive to think that it can be set to one side.

The history warriors will expect the minister to drive home their control of Commonwealth policy and cultural institutions. Yet if the priorities of the history war prevail, there is little chance of maintaining the support of the historical profession. I was therefore particularly encouraged that Bishop invited me, along with leading historians, to participate in the history summit. I am unable to attend, but it is clear evidence that she seeks a genuine partnership.

No doubt there will be disagreements in the summit. A vigorous discussion of different views and approaches is only to be expected. But it would be unfortunate if this opportunity to work together fell victim to the history wars. If we are to seize the opportunity, win the support of the school authorities in the states and territories, and implement a new charter for history, we shall need to work together.

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