

## **Paul Kelly: Our history in disrepair**

*OPINION*

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August 19, 2006

**THE Howard Government's decision to re-establish history as a core academic discipline in all schools opens a new contest about education and rights in the battle of ideas in Australian politics.**

This decision is a direct response to the postmodernist and progressivist grip on the humanities in schools and universities. One consequence has been the degrading of history and the study of Australian history. The aim of federal Education Minister Julie Bishop, as she told this week's history summit in Canberra, is to "see a renaissance of Australian history in our schools".

Why is this aspiration so contentious? Why does it provoke outcry from several states and attacks from the academic community? The answer is because it seeks to overturn the prevailing educational ideology heavily identified with the Labor Party.

The tactical dilemma facing Labor, state and federal, is whether to fight this reform, which is likely to have intellectual merit and public support on its side. Labor's dilemma is acute because the history debate highlights in miniature Labor's educational dilemma: that it is locked into backing producer interests (the education professionals) too often at the cost of the consumers (children and parents).

It is significant, therefore, that Opposition education spokeswoman Jenny Macklin described this week's history summit as "an important opportunity to do something lasting and positive for the teaching of Australian history". The summit had nothing to do with the laughable notion of imposing a John Howard British Empire view of Australia on our children.

Nobody at the summit would tolerate such an idea, certainly none of the professional historians. It was never entertained and it was never discussed. Any claim about a return to a content-only single historical narrative

is nonsense.

The communique produced by the summit enshrined the proposal that Australian history "should be sequentially planned through primary and secondary schooling and should be a distinct subject in years 9 and 10" as an "essential and required core part of all students' learning experience".

The summit said that Australia's history was unique in many ways. A knowledge for students of their own nation was vital when many of our public debates invoke this history. For the record, the communique repudiated any idea of "a single official history" and affirmed that "history encompasses multiple perspectives".

The summit wanted a co-operative approach. It urged the commonwealth to work with the states and territories to achieve these changes. It was explicit about the need to carry teachers behind the project, saying that the changes had to be teachable, that they had to be doable, with a feasible time allocation within the curriculum, and they had to be sustainable. This involved "quality curriculum resources, professional learning for teachers and national profile events such as Australian History Week in schools".

One of the important conclusions was that history should be based on a "clear chronological sequence" so the big Australian stories of democracy, identity and economic progress were seen in their narrative sweep.

Summit participant and former NSW Labor premier Bob Carr, who saved Australian history as a mandatory discipline in his state, went to the core issue. "History should be taught as a stand-alone discipline," Carr said. "It shouldn't be absorbed in other subjects." Bishop put this more bluntly: "We should seriously question, for example, the experiment of mashing up history in studies of society and environment. There is a growing body of evidence that this experiment is failing our children."

That evidence came in a summit paper prepared by Monash University associate professor of education Tony Taylor. After a study of each curriculum, he concluded: "There is no guarantee that the vast majority of students in Australian schools will have progressed through a systematic study of Australian history by the end of Year 10. Indeed, the opposite is almost certainly the case. 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."

This is a polite way of stating the failure. It is documented by Taylor in his analysis of each state and territory system. Herein lies the significance of this week's summit: it is bringing transparency to the system. Just as tariffs could not survive once their true cost was tabled on the bar of public opinion, so the present educational ideology cannot survive once its true nature is exposed in sunlight. This will be a long struggle.

If they reject reform, state ministers will have to defend their systems. The more parents are told the truth about what is happening in schools, the more certain the reformers will win. History is victim to outcomes-based educational philosophy that involves a shift away from content taught to what students can achieve. It is fine in theory, disastrous in practice.

Read what Taylor says about the West Australian curriculum. "There is no detailed curriculum requirement and no particular timetable allocation for Australian history and there is very little direct reference to Australian history in the learning-area statement apart from passing mention of 'cultural, political and economic perspectives on Australia's past'.

"History is studied mainly through the time, continuity and change SOSE learning area section of the Curriculum Framework document, along with investigation, communication and participation, resources, place and space, culture, natural and social systems and active citizenship. SOSE is one of eight learning areas."

Taylor notes that the WA Curriculum Council has a "very strong commitment to outcomes-based education". It is at odds with several teacher groups, parent groups and media outlets. He quotes a practitioner's view from WA, saying: "There are overlaps, gaps and repetitions galore in the teaching of Australian history in Western Australia."

Let's take Queensland. Taylor says its curriculum "uses an outcomes-based approach and history is located in the SOSE key learning area. There are also a number of emphases and priorities that permeate the Queensland curriculum. Key values (democratic process, social justice, ecological and economic sustainability and peace) as well as learning processes (investigating, creating, participating, communicating and reflecting). There have been no public examinations at any level in the Queensland education system for over 30 years."

In relation to Australian history in Queensland, "there is no prescribed curriculum and there are no particular timetable requirements for Australian history".

Take the ACT, one of the worst. Taylor says: "The combination of a SOSE key learning area within a school-based curriculum was criticised by ACT teachers in the 1999-2000 national inquiry on the grounds that history had become a neglected area. On the face of it, students could reach Year 10 having studied very little Australian history as a discrete subject. There is no prescribed curriculum and there are no particular timetable requirements for Australian history. The only mandatory subject in ACT schools is physical education."

If you want to get depressed, then read the entire document. This isn't an easy task because, as Taylor points out, "it is frequently very difficult to discern in several of the curriculum documents where exactly the teaching of Australian history may be found".

There is across the nation "absolutely no consistency of curriculum approach". He says, however, that NSW "operates a discipline-based approach at the secondary school level, has mandatory timetable requirements, a clear syllabus outline and, uniquely, an examination in modern Australian history".

The other redeeming feature is there are history teachers with skill and enthusiasm, yet many have to operate "within a local patchwork curriculum where Australian history is often regarded as an optional extra."

For most states, children and their families are the real losers, none more so than children from lower-income backgrounds who rely on education as their ladder of upward mobility. These are the children state Labor governments are supposed to look after. Labor spends too much time talking about access to education (always critical) at the risk of ignoring the quality of education.

Critics who think this is a non-issue should read the documentation from the summit. It leaves no doubt the Howard Government is addressing a serious problem. The degrading of history and Australian history hurts our civic and national culture and diminishes our education system.

Labor's true place in this debate is as a stakeholder working to get better system, not pretending there's nothing wrong with the history curriculum. That's a laughable stance. As for the claim that curriculum is a state responsibility, there is an obvious answer: this is a case of state failure.

Labor's initial reaction reflected its conflict of interest. It is caught between the interests of educational professionals (a strong pro-Labor lobby) and those of students and parents. Macklin's statement was important because it recognised this debate must be joined, not denied.

The summit, opened by Howard, who was followed by Bishop, was chaired during the day by Bishop's departmental head, Lisa Paul, historian John Hirst and then by Carr.

It chose not to prescribe curriculum details but to endorse three principles that should guide the study of Australian history in schools, drawn from the paper prepared by University of Wollongong associate professor of history and politics Greg Melleuish.

These principles are that a course should emphasise "significant public events" in Australia's history, that Australian history must be viewed against the backdrop of global events and world history, and that there should also be a focus on the everyday experience of people living in Australia 50 or 20,000 years ago.

Melleuish provided an insightful sketch of an Australian history course that provoked wide debate, with each participant having their own views on the details of such a course. That was no surprise. It was neither desirable nor feasible for the summit to endorse any blueprint.

But the spirit of Melleuish's paper and the logic of the summit is that Australian history must be saved from its patchwork, fragmentary and demoralising disrepair with the restoration of the strong narrative themes that encompass the Australian story.

*Paul Kelly was a summit participant.*

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