

Questions will alter the course of history

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THE participants at the history summit broadly accepted the Prime Minister's critique of Australian history teaching in schools, but they came to their own solution of the problem.

The paper and advice of Professor Tony Taylor, an expert in the teaching of history in schools, showed how scrappy and incoherent are the offerings on Australian history (except in NSW) with some topics repeated year after year and others never treated. But his warning to the summit was that if a curriculum were developed that alienated teachers and bored students, we would be worse off than we are at present.

The summit had before it a paper from Professor Greg Melleuish outlining what he thought a school child should know of Australian history by the end of year 10. This sought to rectify some of the imbalances and omissions in the standard accounts of Australian history. Melleuish wanted more attention to middle Australia, to the role of religion, to economic history, to the NSW free-trade party in the early Commonwealth, defeated then by the Victorian protectionists, but these days looking better since we are all free-traders now.

His paper impressed and dismayed the participants. Several speakers said that there was more in it than in a university course and some of it required a level of abstract thinking beyond a young teenager. Another of Taylor's warnings was that the average classroom contained students with IQs ranging from 85 to 140.

So how could the Melleuish offerings be refined? The clue came from Geoffrey Partington, an old campaigner against the excesses of progressive education, but unlike many of that ilk an educationalist himself. He said that any narrative account, which is what the Prime Minister, John Howard, wants to see taught, is a response to a question or questions, implied or explicit. In teaching, the place to begin is with the questions; the narrative is the end-point, not the beginning.

The summit proceeded to consider the large questions which could be the bedrock of the curriculum. These are the open-ended questions mentioned

in the summit's communique. The summit was rushed and the list was not completed. We reached 11. They were shaped to encompass a good deal of what Melleuish had included in his paper, but of course not everything. Here is a sample:

How did a convict society change into a free society?

What were the relations between Aborigines and settlers?

Why did Australia become so prosperous?

What were the relations between men and women?

What were the plans and dreams for Australian society?

Students would deal with three or four such questions in a year's course. With each question they would be working chronologically through a whole century or more.

Take the relations between men and women. In the first European settlement at Sydney Cove there was one woman to six men. What sort of a world was that and how did it change? Caroline Chisholm brought out women to civilise the men; South Australia started off with equal numbers of the sexes, but then the gold rushes skewed the balance again. By the end of the 19th century the number of the sexes was equal in the cities, but the outback was still a man's world. And this is the location of the nationalist literature of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson. This inquiry, interesting in itself, touches on much in the Australian story.

The insistence on pursuing questions that cover a span of years will help to correct the imbalance that the Prime Minister has identified as a failing in what is being taught. Left to choose what they teach, many teachers choose the Vietnam War. If the summit plan is adopted, they can still teach the Vietnam War but the question which they will be pursuing with their students will be: What has been the Australian experience of war?

They must study at least World War I and World War II as well as Vietnam. Their students will see anti-American feeling at its height during the Vietnam War, but Australians welcoming the Americans as saviours in 1942 and a Labor prime minister giving the command of Australian forces to an American general.

Each question will take students deep into Australian society; a number of these long-term inquiries will lead them to an understanding of the broad course of Australian history. They will be regularly bumping into the landmark events. The summit decided to stipulate a short list of these. There will be no surprises here. Students will be expected to know, for

example, that the gold rushes and colonial self-government happened in the 1850s; that Federation in 1901 preceded World War I in 1914.

Some states that don't offer history as a separate discipline have already expressed opposition to this Commonwealth initiative. But not for much longer will the Minister for Education in Queensland be able to declare that the Commonwealth wants students to learn only a list of events. That is not what the summit decided.

John Hirst is chairman of the working group which is to refine the summit's lists of questions and landmark events.

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