



The Hon Julie Bishop MP

Minister for Education, Science and Training
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women's Issues



Media Centre

Speech

Address to the History Teachers' Association of Australia conference, Fremantle

6 October 2006

Thank you Beryl for that wonderful welcome.
Chancellor of Notre Dame, Justice Neville Owen.
Nick Ewbank, President, History Teachers' Association of Australia
Tom Loreck, President, History Teachers' Association of Western
Australia
History teachers, ladies and gentlemen.

This year, the teaching of Australian history has, more so than any year in recent memory, moved from being a topic of mainly academic interest, to a concern of the wider community.

The year started with the Prime Minister's call for a "root and branch renewal" of the teaching of Australian history. Then in August, I convened the Australian History Summit, which resulted in extensive media coverage of the need for a renaissance in Australian history teaching. And earlier this week, the Prime Minister again returned to Australian history when he opined that *"Until recent times, it had become almost de rigueur in intellectual circles to regard Australian history as little more than a litany of sexism, racism and class warfare."*

These developments have placed the teaching of Australian history into the realm of current affairs and contemporary public policy. Importantly, the media coverage of the Summit and subsequent public debate signals great interest in this subject Australia-wide.

Australian history in our schools is an issue with a strong resonance throughout Australian society.

The Australian government wants to see a firm place for history in the school curriculum and the re-establishment of a structured

narrative in the teaching of Australian history.

There is both a quantitative and qualitative problem with the teaching of Australian history.

On the quantitative side, not enough students are learning Australian history. For many years now, fewer than one in four senior secondary students in Australia take a history subject, and only a small portion of that study relates to Australian history.

There is currently no guarantee that students even have an opportunity to study Australian history in a systematic, structured way in all states and territories by the time they complete Year 10. Indeed, as Associate Professor Tony Taylor showed in his paper prepared for the Australian history summit:

... "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."

Professor Taylor noted that 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 Summit participants agreed that:

"The study of Australian history should be sequentially planned through primary and secondary schooling and should be a distinct subject in Years 9 and 10. This would be an essential and required core part of all students' learning experience to prepare them for the 21st century."

As a result of the Summit, I have invited a subgroup of Summit participants to do further work on a series of open-ended questions and a chronology of key events. I am also pleased to announce that I am commissioning additional work on the development of model curriculum, which will include consultation with State, Territory and non-government education authorities, teachers of history, parents, principals and teacher educators. This work is expected to be completed by March 2007.

The Summit provided clear advice on the way forward for strengthening the teaching of Australian history in our schools. I have asked my Department to develop a number of initiatives for the Government's consideration. I have also been seeking submissions on how to take this agenda forward and I certainly

value your views.

Curriculum arrangements and government policies should help the teaching of Australian history, not hinder it. While the story of Australian history in our schools in recent years has not been a happy one, I acknowledge that there are many wonderful history teachers in classrooms around the country doing exciting things, day in, day out, to inspire students about our past.

History can be fascinating and exciting when it is taught by those who know it and love it. It can be deadening if it is taught by those who neither know it nor even like it.

Teachers who are qualified in the teaching of history help prepare students for exercising their rights and responsibilities as citizens, help them evaluate evidence and make judgements, and foster their powers of imagination and empathy – the skills a good history education delivers as Professor Greg Melleuish emphasised in a paper he delivered to the Summit.

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the Summit was the need to engage teachers and students.

We won't have the renaissance we seek in the teaching of Australian history if we can't engage the teachers and students. As the professional body representing teachers of history, I see a pivotal role for the History Teachers' Association. I appreciate the work that you do to sustain the work of history teachers, through organising conferences such as this.

The Australian History Summit did much more than just rekindle interest in the teaching of Australian history in our classrooms – it opened up a much wider issue of public debate. That of the quality of curriculum development, and who should be setting curriculum, and what role the Federal Government should be playing in this function, and also what sort of involvement the wider public should have in knowing what is, or is not, being taught in classrooms.

The politics of education has largely moved on from the issue of staff to student ratios. The new frontier of educational reform in Australia is about teacher quality and curriculum.

Recently, there was an unprecedented event in education circles – Australia's representative on the executive of the United Nations' education body, UNESCO, Professor Kenneth Wiltshire, made a significant attack, through the media, on State and territory governments for their failure to monitor the quality of teaching in their education systems.

Professor Wiltshire pointed out that State Labor governments, who are under the influence of the teachers' unions, are unable to achieve any significant reforms to improve educational quality. Professor Wiltshire's criticisms underscore the reality that any government unwilling or incapable of standing up to the teachers unions will be unable to put students and educational standards first.

Recent research, both in Australia and overseas, concludes that the critical factor in determining a students' achievement at school is the quality of the teacher.

With that in mind, in terms of promoting teacher quality, I have advocated two central planks. I strongly believe that we need to start giving teachers performance-based pay, and we need to develop a nationally consistent and rigorous system of compulsory professional development.

We need to recognise that there are outstanding teachers. We need to identify, encourage and reward our outstanding teachers. This will provide incentives for all teachers to lift their standards and aspire to deliver better results for their students.

We need to recognise that not all teachers are equal in their ability, commitment and performance. Yet they are all paid on the same basis of years in the job, not on merit.

Performance-based remuneration for teachers can be used to drive improvements in student achievement in key areas, and encourage some of our best teachers to work in schools, and continue to work in schools, that need them the most, in disadvantaged areas.

However, not all teachers can be categorised as outstanding, and we cannot simply rely on incentive payments to ensure standards are lifted across the board.

Improving teacher quality can be achieved through a nationally consistent regime for compulsory professional development linked to on-going teacher registration.

Compulsory professional development for teachers needs to be of a high standard and serve two purposes. First, to motive good teachers to improve their performance, and second, to lift the skills of all teachers and ensure those skills remain up to date and relevant to the children in their classrooms.

Many other professions require their members to update skills and comply with registration standards.

The information available in Australia reveals a very disjointed, fragmented approach to professional development required for teacher registration, however there are question marks about the quality of the programs and the support available that is available to both the teachers and the schools.

In addition to improving the quality of teachers, we also need to improve the quality of what is actually taught. There is widespread community concern about the content of curriculum being developed by State government education authorities.

There has been much debate recently about the curriculum in each State and territory, including the debacle of Western Australia's implementation of Outcomes-Based Education.

In addition to the concerns about Australian history, over recent weeks we have had the geographers calling for a strengthening of the teaching of that discipline in schools, and some media scrutiny of the politicisation of geography.

And how is it that we have gone from mastering not only English but also Latin in year 12 to a situation where universities are having to teach remedial English in first year university as students don't have the literacy skills to undertake tertiary education?

I am convinced of the need for the Commonwealth to take a leadership role in a fight for a back-to-basics approach across curriculum – not wrest control of curriculum – but working to ensure that we have consistently high standards across the country.

Our students need to be equipped with the fundamentals, essential and enduring skills and learning that will help make them informed and productive citizens.

The failure of State Governments to protect the interests of young Australians from trendy educational fads has led to the community turning to the Federal Government to take action.

The serious question needs to be asked whether it is time for a common model curriculum across the country. I think this is a debate that we must have. Let's open the lid on what is being taught in our schools, and how, and have a debate on what could be taught and why.

Parents are right to be concerned with courses of study that would have students deconstructing that trashy reality show *Big Brother*, rather than learning the classics of Australian literature like Banjo Paterson, or Shakespeare. Contemplating a movie poster rather than analysing Patrick White?

And students should not be forced to interpret Shakespeare from a feminist or Marxist perspective. They should bring their own interpretations and values to these works of literature. History and geography classes should not be allowed to slide into political science courses by another name.

A common model curriculum would (by virtue of being on the national stage) result in curriculum being made more accountable through greater public scrutiny at the bar of public opinion. This would result in model parents having greater confidence in what is, or is not, being taught in schools across the nation.

My comments are not directed at teachers. Our teachers are a precious national resource. Rather, I am critical of the social engineers working away in State government education authorities.

Ideologues who have hijacked school curriculum and are experimenting with the education of our young people from a comfortable position of unaccountability, safe within education bureaucracies.

When a doctor prescribes a drug that research shows not to work, what happens to the doctor? When educators use 'approaches' that research shows not to work, nothing happens, except to the children who suffer through it.

The community is demanding an end to fads and wants a return to a commonsense curriculum, with agreed core subjects, like Australian history, and a renewed focus on literacy and numeracy. The curriculum must be challenging, aiming for high standards, and not accepting the lowest common denominator. We must not lower the educational bar to make sure everyone gets over it, not raising it to aspire to excellence. And yet when we hear people calling for solutions, a different way of thinking is usually the last thing they have in mind. What they want is something that doesn't challenge their assumptions or violate the conventional wisdom.

So let me suggest something that will obviously shock the sensibilities. Judging by this mornings media, it already has. We need to take school curriculum out of the hands of ideologues in

the State and Territory education bureaucracies and give it to say a national board of studies, comprising the sensible centre of educators – with representatives of our States and Territories, bringing to the table the very best examples of all that the States have to offer.

Just as the History Summit experts are developing a model curriculum for Australian history, so could this occur in other core subjects across the country.

While there has been some progress towards greater national consistency, it is largely an exercise in frustration and obstruction. We are working towards national assessments and national statements of learning in key subjects by 2008. But take for example, the issue of a common optional eligible school starting age. This was first raised for debate in 1988. There are currently 5 different eligible starting ages across the country.

After many years of discussion, a cost/benefit study was commissioned last year. All States considered the report at a Ministerial Council meeting in July, and no agreement was reached – it has been referred for further investigation. Some likened it to Groundhog Day on the standard national rail gauge debate.

I am striving to establish a national year 12 certificate to provide students with national recognition of their time at school, but again, no agreement or sign of any agreement so far. There are currently 9 different year 12 certificates across Australia, each backed by separate curriculum developed by 8 different education authorities.

Is it necessary for each State to develop a single curriculum? Do we need to have a physics curriculum developed for Queensland, and another, almost identical physics curriculum for Western Australia?

Think of the duplication, the waste of resources. The States and Territories collectively spend more than \$180 million every year in just running their boards of studies and curriculum councils – each developing curriculum documents, and in many cases, developing if not entirely the same, then very similar curriculum.

Why can't we identify the highest standards across the nation and adopt them nationally or focus on best practice from each State? Then we can channel the savings back into ensuring that every student, wherever they attend school in Australia, receives a quality education, with quality teachers, in a quality environment.

I have commissioned a comparative study into year 12 curriculum to look at what is being taught around Australia, to determine whether there is a need for 8 separate curricula for physics, chemistry, or English or history, for example, between the States.

The report will be provided to me this year.

Getting our schools back to the fundamentals will have a positive flow-on effect for students and parents across the nation – both in government and non-government schools. I believe it is an educational agenda worth pursuing.

I wish you well in your deliberations and I look forward to hearing of the outcomes of the conference. It is with great pleasure that I declare the 2006 History Teachers' Association of Australia conference open.

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