

Historically, it's a puzzling decision

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THE State Government's decision to remove one of its employees from working on a national curriculum for Australian history is puzzling. Jennifer Lawless, an experienced history teacher and Board of Studies inspector, was an invited participant at the Federal Government's History Summit last August. This reflected respect for her and for the teaching of Australian history in NSW schools, widely acknowledged the best in the nation. Participants at the summit elected her to a working group to develop some of the summit's recommendations. The State Government showed no disquiet with any of this.

This week, Ms Lawless was invited by the federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, Julie Bishop, to serve on a new reference group to advise on a model Australian history curriculum for years 9 and 10. Any curriculum to emerge from this process may well be diminished if NSW is not involved. So why withdraw her from the process now? The NSW Minister for Education and Training, John Della Bosca, has called the reference group "a political stunt". He has criticised the choice of two of its four members, the historian Geoffrey Blainey and the commentator Gerard Henderson. Mr Della Bosca says Professor Blainey's problem is that he "has very firm views on one interpretation of Australian history, which happen to accord with the Prime Minister's", while Mr Henderson is "not a professional historian".

These are not serious objections. Professor Blainey is Australia's greatest living historian, whatever his views, so the notion he should be excluded from a process such as this is eccentric. And Mr Henderson may not be a professional historian, but he has a PhD and has written two respected history books. In any case, Professor Blainey and Mr Henderson are not the only members of the group. There is also the historian Nicholas Brown and Ms Lawless, until she was withdrawn. Mr Della Bosca has not criticised their views or expertise.

A striking feature of the move towards a national curriculum for Australian history is that until now, it has largely avoided becoming a political football, despite the potential for this to occur. The left was anxious the process might be taken over by conservatives, while the right worried about the principle of Canberra imposing its will on the states. But so far most of those involved remain supportive. This is partly due to good management by Ms Bishop, and partly because Australian historians are happy someone - anyone - in government is taking their subject seriously.

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