

Howard rewrites nation's history

Imre Salusinszky | *October 11, 2007*

JOHN Howard has gone above the heads of state education ministers and bureaucrats and set out a detailed course on the nation's history that he says should be taught to every student in every Australian school.

The Prime Minister's guide to the teaching of Australian history, which will be released today, organises the nation's story into 10 chapters, stretching from indigenous settlement 60,000 years ago to the effect of globalisation on Australian life between 1976 and 2000.

The document is aimed at parents and teachers, but The Australian understands that the Government will use its four-year education funding agreement with the states, due for re-negotiation next year, to force them to teach a version of Mr Howard's course.

Students in the program, which the Prime Minister says should be compulsory across Year 9 and Year 10, will be expected to be familiar with more than 70 "milestone events", along with the biographies of hundreds of characters from 18th century botanist Joseph Banks to former prime minister Bob Hawke.

The 10 periods are: First peoples; Early encounters; British colonies (1788-1850); Emerging nation (1851-1900); The new Commonwealth (1901-19); The Roaring Twenties and the Lean Thirties (1920-38); World War II and post-war reconstruction (1939-49); Building Modern Australia: Times of Prosperity and Social Change (1950-75); and Australia and the Shrinking Globe (1976-2000).

In addition, students will be expected to analyse the material through nine "perspectives": Aboriginal; regional and global; biographical; beliefs and values; economic; everyday life; gender; environmental; and local.

Each period has explanatory notes, with the 1950-75 segment, for example, including the dismissal of the Whitlam government and urging students to "reflect on the emergence of newsocial and protest movements, reflecting changes in gender relations and family structures, in attitudes to race and ethnicity, and to human rights and morality".

The course is the latest step in the "root and branch renewal" in the teaching of Australian history for which Mr Howard called last year, and follows last year's History Summit, convened by Education Minister Julie Bishop, which delegated a working group to develop an ideal history course based on dates and narrative, rather than abstract themes.

The fact Mr Howard has chosen to release the model syllabus now, and brand it with his own authority, suggests he plans to give the so-called "culture wars" a prominent role in his campaign for a fifth term in office.

At the moment, with the exception of NSW and Victoria, the states teach Australian history within a larger subject, Studies of Society and its Environment, along with geography, environmental studies and political and other social studies.

However, since the summit, Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania have all shown a willingness to return to a more traditional approach believed to be popular with voters.

And Opposition education spokesman Stephen Smith last night made Labor's support for the push clear.

"I strongly believe that history, particularly Australian history, is a very important part of the curriculum," he said.

Earlier this year, Mr Howard said Australian history, which he insists should be a stand-alone subject, was being taught "as some kind of fragmented stew of moods and events, rather than some kind of proper narrative".

Importantly, a suggestion from the summit that the new subject should be taught via "open-ended questions", which was criticised by some conservative scholars, has disappeared from the final draft, which was overseen by a committee that included social commentator Gerard Henderson and historian Geoffrey Blainey.

The Government plans eventually to follow the document with specific guidelines on outcomes and assessment and detailed curriculum resources for schools.

One of Australia's leading conservative historians, University of Wollongong scholar Gregory Melleuish, last night described Mr Howard's course as "the ultimate camel" because it had been shaped by so many committees. Dr Melleuish, who participated in the summit but criticised its outcomes, said: "The problem with this sort of document is that it tells one very little about how things will actually work in the classroom."

He was particularly critical of the "nationalist" drift of the course, which he said did not include enough international context and would not equip students for understanding Australia's role in a globalised world.

Anna Clark, grand-daughter of the late Manning Clark and a historian at Monash University, said she was pleased Mr Howard's course "requires not only knowledge of what happened, but how we relate to it".

But her Monash colleague Tony Taylor, whose draft version of the course was the basis for the Henderson-Blainey panel, said the final version was too crowded.

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22566188-13881,00.html>