

# The lessons of history teachers ignored

Stuart Macintyre  
October 13, 2007

There is an enormous wellspring of support for restoring the study of history in Australian schools. It was evident at last year's history summit, where participants rescued the cause from ill-judged efforts to pre-empt what ought to be taught.

The goodwill remained while the working party established after the summit worked to give substance to the approach that was agreed there. But the broad consensus has been put in jeopardy by John Howard's decision to ride roughshod over the states. By interfering once again in a co-operative endeavour, he risks sacrificing a worthy cause in pursuit of electoral advantage.

The latest difficulties arose after the working party's recommendations reached the Prime Minister's office. They were based on consultations with teachers, curriculum officers and historians. They were sensible and practical, and the Education Minister, Julie Bishop, was happy with them. But the Prime Minister wasn't, so he insisted on further change and has now taken the release of the amended guide out of the minister's hands.

It is not that the "external reference group" charged with reworking the guide lacks historical expertise. No one could dispute the eminence of Geoffrey Blainey. I've worked with Nicholas Brown and Elizabeth Ward, and have great respect for them. My friendship with Gerard Henderson began when we were both first-year history students at the University of Melbourne. If he sometimes gives the impression that a historian needs no more than strong views and a good filing system, his enthusiasm for the study of the past is genuine.

The difficulty with this external reference group is that it was called in at the behest of the Prime Minister, cutting across the broad coalition of support and the consultation with those who will have to implement its recommendations.

The result is well-meaning but impractical. It's too crowded to work in classes, especially as they will be compulsory (conscripts make unwilling learners), and will be taught in many cases by teachers without training in history. There are more than 70 milestone events to be studied, with more than 100 individuals identified for attention and no fewer than nine perspectives to apply to Australian history.

Seventy events and 100 prominent Australians are too many to treat more than cursorily, and at the same time they are too few. Hence John and Elizabeth Macarthur fail to make the cut in the colonial period, as does Wentworth. We get Eyre and Sturt but not Mitchell, Leichhardt or Burke. Blainey's hand can be seen in some inclusions, such as Fred Cato, but if him why not Sidney Myer?

As the curriculum moves closer to the present it becomes more populist, so Lottie Lyell and R.M. Williams are named for the interwar period but not John Latham, James Scullin or Edward Theodore. Of living Australians I admire Graeme Clarke and Peter Cosgrove, but where is Gough Whitlam?

This is a game that anyone can play but it is an inherent difficulty with a compulsory curriculum. By prescribing some, it excludes others.

Among the nine perspectives that are applied to the curriculum is the global. "No aspect of Australian history," the guide states, "can be fully appreciated without awareness of Australia's relationships with external influences." But the milestone events and their explanatory notes barely hint at these relationships.

On this, if not much else, I am in agreement with Greg Melleuish, professor of history and politics at the University of Wollongong. If we do nothing else in teaching Australian history, we have to make it less insular and solipsistic, we have to present it as part of a much larger history.

I am teaching Australian history to Harvard undergraduates. It is hardly surprising that very few know much about it: Steve Irwin turned out to be the name that most recognised. The best way to proceed, I soon decided, was to draw out comparisons between Australia's history and their own, to explore the differences and similarities of two settler societies each set in motion by the passage of people and ideas. That, in turn, encourages them to see their own American history differently.

But it is not so much that these very bright students don't know much Australian history that is the difficulty: it is their lack of knowledge of the rest of the world. In an early lecture I reminded them of Oscar Wilde's remark that Britain and America are two different countries divided by a common language. Oscar who?

One consequence of making Australian history compulsory in years 9 and 10 will be to crowd out other histories. That is one of the perils of a compulsory subject and one of the reasons the proposal concerns history teachers. If you make young Australians study history, you need to ensure it is engaging.

Australian history used to be taught in schools as a matter of course and in too many cases it created a lasting aversion for the subject. Enthusiasts are inclined to look back on their own experience with a rosy nostalgia, to prescribe a curriculum and assume that all students will learn it. The failure to listen to history teachers is a big error.

It is hardly surprising that they have been disregarded. The Federal Government has repeatedly used our schools and teachers as scapegoats. Think of the allegation that government schools fail to teach values - a failure immediately remedied by Brendan Nelson's object lesson in bullying when he made flagpoles a condition of federal funding.

The Prime Minister's release of the guide on the eve of an election, and the suggestion that acceptance will be a condition of future federal funding, are all of a piece with this pattern. They imperil a good cause.

The best solution would be to leave it until after the election, and start again with the states and the history teachers.

**Stuart Macintyre is the visiting professor of Australian studies at Harvard and a professor of history at the University of Melbourne.**

Copyright © 2007. The Sydney Morning Herald. [Fairfax Digital](#)

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/the-lessons-of-history-teachers-ignored/2007/10/12/1191696170399.html>