

PM to make Australian history compulsory

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October 11, 2007

AUSTRALIAN history will be compulsory for all students in years 9 and 10 from 2009 in a radical overhaul of the education system as the Howard Government moves to reignite the debate over schools standards on the eve of the election.

Prime Minister John Howard will announce today that all states will be forced to introduce compulsory history in the early years of secondary school as a condition of receiving \$42 billion in federal funding.

Teachers will be required to teach from more than 70 milestones in a nationally consistent curriculum, to be released by Mr Howard today. These milestones include the Myall Creek massacre in 1838, the introduction of free and secular education in Victoria in 1872, Papua New Guinea independence in 1975 and the 1999 Australia-led intervention in East Timor.

Making history compulsory is a massive change to the current system, with NSW the only state in which Australian history is a compulsory stand-alone subject. In Victoria, there is no detailed curriculum requirement and no particular timetable allocation to teach Australian history.

Opposition education spokesman Stephen Smith said he had "no objection to history being a compulsory component of the curriculum for parts of the secondary school years".

Mr Howard will use today's announcement to launch an attack on the states over the standards of schools. In a blistering attack on the states earlier this year, he claimed some curriculum material contained "incomprehensible sludge" and the need for nationally consistent curriculums was a no-brainer when 80,000 school students move interstate each year.

Mr Howard has repeatedly lamented that too often history was taught without "any sense of structured narrative" and replaced by a "fragmented stew of themes and issues". He said last year "history had succumbed to a postmodern culture of relativism, where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated".

Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop said in July last year that "not enough students are learning Australian history and there is too much political bias and not enough pivotal facts and dates being taught". A working group was appointed after a national Australian history summit in Canberra last year to develop a core curriculum to teach Australian history in years 9 and 10.

But the Government has more than doubled the number of milestones students must learn to more than 70.

A source who has seen the curriculum told *The Age* that teachers were likely to react negatively to the prescribed detail.

"There are more than twice the number of milestones originally recommended, which is going to wreck any attempt to spend decent time on each topic," the source said.

"A lot of teachers are going to find it very difficult to get through them without racing ... It's like Mr Gradgrind in Dickens' *Hard Times* — they are only interested in the facts ... too much prescription doesn't work and a broad but clear framework does."