

Raking over the past

Kevin Donnelly | *October 13, 2007*

AS expected, Prime Minister John Howard's intervention in the culture wars, represented by the proposed Australian history guide for years 9 and 10 of high school, has drawn a chorus of criticism from the usual suspects.

State Labor education ministers are one in the argument that each of their history curriculum documents represents best practice and that the guide is superfluous and a political stunt.

Historians such as the University of Melbourne's Stuart Macintyre, author of *The History Wars* and a vocal opponent of the Howard Government's education policies, have criticised the guide as well meant but overly detailed, solipsistic and difficult to implement in the classroom.

As a result of a 1991 meeting of Australian education ministers, the school curriculum was divided into eight learning areas and history was re-badged as "time, continuity and change", disappearing into the amorphous and politically correct stew represented by the subject known as studies of society and environment.

While the secondary school curriculum in NSW, and more recently Victoria, gives history special status, treating it as a stand-alone subject and detailing significant events, people and historical forces that must be taught, the subject has not fared as well in other jurisdictions.

The more conservative view - where students are taught a narrative associated with significant historical events, individuals and historical forces that shaped Australia's growth as a nation - has been jettisoned in favour of an inquiry-based issues approach that emphasises what is local and contemporary.

Teaching what US academic Jerome Bruner has termed the structure of a discipline has given way to so-called generic skills, dispositions and competencies. This is largely as a result of Australia's adoption of outcomes-based education, otherwise known as Essential Learnings.

The Tasmanian and the South Australian Essential Learnings approach defines curriculum in terms of broad and vacuous categories such as futures, identity, interdependence and thinking and communication.

In Queensland, the main SOSE values are defined as peace, ecological and economic sustainability, social justice and democratic process, all with a politically correct slant.

The West Australian Curriculum Framework document describes history as "time, continuity and change" and, instead of detailing what should be taught, provides teachers with generalised outcome statements, such as: "They (students) can identify the constructive and destructive consequences of continuity and change and describe examples of both evolutionary and revolutionary change."

Unlike the approach associated with SOSE, Howard's new Guide to Teaching Australian History in Years 9 and 10 treats it as a stand-alone subject, and its authors bite the bullet and stipulate in detail a series of topics, milestones and essential content that all students need to learn if they are to understand and appreciate the nation's past.

Although it's being attacked as the product of a conservative ideology, it should be noted the new guide is inclusive when it suggests students should study history through a range of perspectives, including those of gender, the environment, and indigenous and everyday life.

History teaching, and education more broadly, was once based on a belief in essential content, and that some interpretations are closer to the truth than others and that evidence should be weighed impartially. But the SOSE curriculums argue that interpreting the past is subjective and clouded by each person's ideological baggage and that it is wrong to stipulate what must be taught about it.

In 1992, the new history within the Victorian curriculum was celebrated on the basis that "there is no single version of history that can be presented to students. History is a version of the past (that) varies according to the person and the times ... each generation reinterprets the past in the light of its own values and attitudes."

The 2000 edition of the Queensland SOSE document says students should be told "knowledge is always tentative", that they should "critique the socially constructed elements of text" and understand "how privilege and marginalisation are created and sustained in society".

Instead of providing a clear narrative detailing Australia's unique cultural and social growth and valuing what we hold in common, the SOSE approach emphasises diversity and difference. The Tasmanian curriculum, in explaining what is meant by social responsibility, emphasises the need to endorse "multiple perspectives" and "diverse views".

The South Australian curriculum, in outlining the importance of students having an understanding of cultural and global connections, also emphasises diversity and difference, as does the ACT curriculum, under the heading "Australian perspectives", in saying that students should experience the "diversity of Australian life".

The way studying Australian history is described in the Victorian curriculum also stresses diversity and multiple influences. Significant is that the new federal guide, in opposition to the idea of cultural relativism, acknowledges under the perspective "beliefs and values" the importance of "the influence of Christian churches and the liberal democratic philosophies" that underpin and safeguard our unique way of life.

A 1999 report, *The Future of the Past*, funded by the federal Government and written by historian Tony Taylor of Monash University, concludes that "Australian history in schools is characterised by lack of continuity, topic repetition and lack of coherence".

The national history report also includes an observation by Monash University historian Mark Peel that many students enter university with a fragmented historical understanding.

Peel observed that while they might be strong in terms of questioning interpretations and appreciating the contribution of those voices normally excluded, such as Aborigines and women, undergraduate students lacked an understanding of the larger picture or the ability to place isolated events and issues within the broader context.

Peel states: "Students seem anxious about the absence of a story by which to comprehend change, or to understand how the nation and world they are about to inherit came to be."

They do have maps of the past. Their maps are more likely than mine to focus on particular visual images, those snatches of documentary film or photographs (that) increasingly encapsulate the past. Indeed, their sense of the world's history is often based on intense moments and fragments that have no real momentum or connection."

In a speech given at the Queensland Teachers Union conference in 2005, Australian Education Union president Pat Byrne effectively argued that the cultural Left had extended its influence in and through the education system.

Byrne said: "We have succeeded in influencing the curriculum development in schools, education departments and universities. The conservatives have a lot of work to do to undo the progressive curriculum."

Although yet to be translated into classroom practice, the new guide to Australian history suggests that Byrne should not be overconfident.

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