

Gillard wants history back to basics

Justine Ferrari and Lauren Wilson | *December 03, 2007*

INCOMING education minister Julia Gillard yesterday backed the traditional interpretation of the nation's history, saying she believed Australia was "settled", rather than "invaded".

In a sign that she will adopt an orthodox approach to overseeing Labor's education policies, including the creation of a national schools curriculum, Ms Gillard supported students being exposed to different interpretations of Australian history and reaching their own conclusions.

She also reiterated that Labor would focus very strongly on the basic skills of maths, reading and writing in the development of the curriculum.

Asked yesterday if Australia was settled or invaded, Ms Gillard said it depended on one's perspective.

"I would say Australia was settled," she told the Ten Network's Meet the Press program. "I can understand that many indigenous Australians would say that it was invaded and I think for senior students who study history in our secondary schools, one of the things they would consider is the conflict of views."

Ms Gillard's comments were interpreted as a clear message to the Left, and the teachers unions, that she would not support the opening of a new front in the culture wars, specifically not in the areas of educational theory or Australian history. "We need to make sure that kids end up with all of the basic skills," she said. "You've got to be able to read, you've got to be able to write, you've got to be able to do maths. Unless you have those basic skills, you can't unlock the door to wider learning. Our focus will be on literacy and numeracy."

Describing herself as an "educational traditionalist", Ms Gillard referred to a story in The Weekend Australian that revealed maths skills among Year 7 students last year fell to their lowest level in the five years of testing. "We can't let that happen. They're never going to cope with wider curricula if they don't have those enabling skills of reading, writing and doing numbers."

Ms Gillard's comments on European settlement of Australia similarly align her with a conservative view of the history wars, one shared by new prime minister Kevin Rudd, who was accused in the 1990s of reinstating a Eurocentric view of Australian history in Queensland school texts.

Writing in The Weekend Australian, indigenous leader Noel Pearson referred to Mr Rudd's role, while working for the Goss government in Queensland, when a primary

school book drafted by the state Education Department pushed the idea that Australia was "invaded".

The resource for teachers said terms such as settlement, explorer or pioneer were not acceptable and the preferred term was invasion. After intervention by then premier Wayne Goss, the cabinet office, of which Mr Rudd was then head, produced a replacement book, which said many Aborigines interpreted the First Fleet's arrival as invasion but "colonisation" or "settlement" also accurately described the same event.

Mr Pearson said the incident demonstrated that Mr Rudd was loath to take up the fight for the Left in the culture wars and would need a political strategy to move the debate beyond polarity.

A spokeswoman for Ms Gillard later confirmed that she believed people could form their own views about the interpretation of Australia's history and those discussions should be part of learning history at school.

John Maynard, chair of Aboriginal Studies at the University of Newcastle, said Ms Gillard's response to the settlement/invasion question was "disappointing" but "not unexpected".

"It is a great shame that this new government missed an opportunity to settle some of the disputes of recent years and set us on a new course," Professor Maynard said yesterday.

The indigenous historian remains sceptical Australia can move beyond the culture wars under a Rudd government. "I had hoped he'd matured and come a lot further, but the warning bells were there, so to speak," he said, referring to Mr Rudd's past involvement in the Queensland school curriculum. "I think they'll be quite conservative and not much will change. I lived in hope last week but this is not unexpected."

Chris Sarra, head of the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, said he was surprised by Ms Gillard's comments, given she was from the Left. "But there's a truth that exists, whether or not people want to acknowledge it. I think all of us know what that truth is regardless of how we euphemise it and at some stage we have to have the courage to face up to the reality of the past," he said.

But right-wing historian Keith Windschuttle endorsed Ms Gillard's opinion. While he would not be drawn on the politics, he said: "I certainly agree Australia was settled rather than invaded. Except for the cases of Queensland and Tasmania, most people on the Left of politics accept this."

Australian Education Union acting federal president Angelo Gavrielatos said Ms Gillard's comments were perfectly reasonable and measured. "Of course we want kids to have the best possible grasp of literacy and numeracy and as they get older to be able to challenge and delve more deeply into areas of Australian history, literature and politics," he said.

© The Australian

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22859096-5013871,00.html>