

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL HISTORY CURRICULUM

A Note of Concern: Whither the 19th century?

History (as well as English, science and maths) will be one of the compulsory subjects in the new Australian Curriculum, but you may be interested in a vexatious element within the new directions – that the 19th century has been largely consigned to the sidelines.

As you know during the course of the 19th century:

- **our Westminster style political systems were adopted by the various states, independently at first, and then by the Commonwealth of Australia**
- **the basic laws by which our society functions to this day - and many of our current key national and state instrumentalities - were implanted**
- **the formation of many of our unique cultural characteristics and attitudes - our wonderfully distinctive egalitarianism, the envy of most other nations – metamorphosed into a unique Australian ‘style’.**
- **the distinctive way we speak the English language ‘refined’ itself into its present form.**

John Howard pointed out that much of this is missing from the new Australian History Curriculum in his inaugural Sir Paul Hasluck Foundation oration in September 2012, *A Proper Sense of History*. Certainly, some of the key elements have been included in Year 4/5, and hidden away there is also a small window in Year 9/10, but where is there a core of early Australian history studies for the key senior secondary years (11 & 12), the period when high school students are beginning to mature intellectually and think in greater depth about the provenances of the society in which they live? With these omissions, the opportunity to convey many of the origins of our distinctive cultural propensities have been alarmingly diminished:

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority has written:

The curriculum generally takes a world history approach within which the history of Australia is taught. It does this in order to equip students for the world (local, regional and global) in which they live. An understanding of world history enhances students’ appreciation of Australian history.

Does it? Is this not putting the cart before the horse? Do we have to so exclusively embrace this so-called ‘internationalism’ currently propounded? Are we now, therefore, through the conduit of our new Australian Curriculum, in the process of disbanding or appreciably diminishing a crucial phase in our historical metamorphosis?

Have we no early history and culture worth telling? What of the cultural and physical impetus and the ‘imprint’ of the tens of thousands of former convicts and their descendants in the early nineteenth century; what of the huge importance of the Ballarat Reform League in the 1850s, the provenance of much that transpired politically throughout Australia following those dramatic events on the Victorian goldfields? What of unique poetry and literature composed by the likes of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson; the distinctive legends, ‘colour’ and atmosphere they created?

Should our Ministers of Education stand up and make the strong point that it is an imperative that a modicum of Australia's vital early years of struggle be inserted into prominent places within the new curriculum? Additionally, should the children and grandchildren of the successive waves of migrants since World War II know the foundations of the society to which they now belong? Should they know that their new national identity and the political and legal foundations they now depend upon are strongly linked to events one hundred years and more before their arrival?

Have the ‘movers and shakers’ within the National History Curriculum lost the plot? Whither the necessary content to engender in the coming generations of Australian students and citizens, a strong, mature sense of our unique national identity?

Yours sincerely,

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