



Education Matters

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The recent release of the review of the National Curriculum in October was a watershed moment in the debate over education in Australia. Their document is a devastating, if low-key, critique of the entire national curriculum project. Donnelly and Wiltshire have thoroughly validated the Institute of Public Affairs' argument that the National Curriculum is systemically biased against Western Civilisation, denigrates and sidelines our civilisation's religious heritage, and is deeply ideological. Not that you would have known that from the press coverage.

Hours after the document's release, Fairfax papers were claiming 'Culture wars fizzle out in national curriculum review'. The apparent consensus was that the document laid to rest concerns about political bias in the curriculum, focusing more on problems with the curriculum's implementation and administration.



This is a bad misreading of the report written by the education specialist and IPA contributor Kevin Donnelly and the Professor of Public Administration Kenneth Wiltshire.

In 2000, the IPA published Kevin Donnelly's paper 'Education Reform: Who Should Control the Curriculum?' Donnelly warned that the school curriculum was being co-opted by the left. All curriculums are ideological, virtually by definition. As Donnelly argued in his paper, the left-wing capture of the education establishment meant that any national curriculum was likely to be deeply infused with the assumptions.

The curriculum that Julia Gillard commissioned as education minister in the Rudd government—and now being taught to students across the country— certainly proved Donnelly's warning.

The National Curriculum couldn't have been more explicit about its ideological content if it tried. It embedded three 'cross-curriculum priorities' into every subject from history to maths: sustainability, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. There's nothing wrong with teaching these subjects as part of a balanced curriculum. They are important. But they're more than just topics: they are designed to be the three great themes of Australian education from here on.

Imagine if those three priorities were instead Australia's British heritage, the importance of economic growth, and Western Civilisation. The left would have a fit. We would be constantly informed that the curriculum is conservatism run amok. Defending her legacy, Julia Gillard has repeatedly claimed that there was no political interference in the curriculum—it was designed and written entirely by the best education experts in the country.

But the Donnelly-Wiltshire review finds that the cross-curriculum priorities were introduced at the behest not of experts, but of education ministers—almost entirely all Labor.

The IPA was the first to sound the alarm about the deep seated problems with the curriculum. In 2011 the now-education minister Christopher Pyne launched the IPA's *A National Curriculum: A Critique*— the first major monograph in the Foundations of Western Civilisation Program. It was thanks to that work that the Coalition announced it would review the curriculum to ensure that students would learn how 'our society develop[ed], from what well spring did we come and what are the foundations for our Western society that is the envy of so many around the world'.

Exposing the ideological undercurrents of the National Curriculum has been a long running task for the IPA. A few months after the publication of *A National Curriculum: A Critique*, Executive Director John Roskam sent copies to every member of parliament along with a letter that detailed 'the failure of the National Curriculum to tell the story of Australia's democratic history.'

Few federal politicians have spent time considering the complexities of the National Curriculum. But what Australian children are taught—and whether the curriculum is controlled by bureaucrats or parents—is one of the most important and consequential policies on the national stage:



what students learn about the past shapes how they think of the present and the future. And when those students become adults how they think of the past, present, and future shapes our community, our society, and our country.

Education matters. When he spoke to IPA members in October, the philosopher Frank Furedi argued that young people have been separated from the value systems that underpin liberal democracy. (An edited version of his remarks appears in this edition of the *IPA Review*.)

The Donnelly-Wiltshire review demonstrates just how impoverished Australia will become if we let the left capture and monopolise the education system