



One can only hope that no-one thinks that the holding of the History Summit in August this year addressed all the issues of how history is taught and learnt in Australia.

It is important to be clear that the Summit actually had quite a narrow focus. It was looking at how Australian history is, and should be, taught in Years 9 and 10 in secondary schools. It was not looking at how non-Australian history should be taught; nor was it addressing the teaching of history at any other academic level—primary, the rest of secondary or tertiary; nor was it looking at any other role of history in society.

Naturally, the Federal Government was keen to talk up both the significance of the Summit and to paint a picture of success in its aftermath. Hence, at its conclusion, Education Minister Julie Bishop announced that it had been an ‘outstanding success’ and had laid a ‘solid foundation for further de-

velopment of a framework to promote the teaching of Australian History to students throughout the nation’.

Bishop’s bullish view was not shared by key participant in the Summit, Professor Gregory Melleuish, who expressed disappointment at the outcome. He had reason to feel aggrieved.

Melleuish’s views were quoted with approval by the Prime Minister on Australia Day, in a speech that signalled the Government’s new-found focus on Australian history teaching. Melleuish was then asked to prepare one of the two papers presented at the Summit. While he eagerly carried the ball up into the fray, the proceedings left him dangerously exposed to the rigorous tactics of his opponents in the history establishment’s defensive line.

It was clear straight after the Summit that the recommendations in the Melleuish paper—that narrative history needs to be taught—played little role in what emerged as the final communiqué. With the subsequent release of the full transcript of proceedings, it became possible for non-attendees to make their own assessment as to how the summit delivered an outcome that was more satisfying to many in the his-

tory establishment than to Melleuish.

The first of the three sessions considered a paper from Education academic, Tony Taylor, which showed how badly history was currently being taught in most jurisdictions. What was remarkable about this session was that it was largely devoted to a debate about whether the teaching of Australian History should be ‘mandatory’ or ‘core’. Several participants queried whether there was, in fact, a difference between the terms. It seems that they actually mean the same, but ‘core’ is less likely to offend bolshie teachers.

Mark Lopez was brave enough to raise the ‘incredible politicisation’ of history as it is taught in schools. The general lack of concern at the Summit about this fundamental problem became clearer in the two afternoon sessions, when debate turned to the key issue of talking about what every child should know.

In rejecting the narrative approach of the Melleuish paper, in favour of a question-based model proposed on the day by John Hirst, the participants demonstrated that they were largely content to see the collectivist assumptions behind much of what is taught

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in our schools remain unaddressed. The delivery of the Summit's position that history be taught as a stand-alone subject may be an improvement on the status quo in some States. However, as Melleuish has pointed out, the imposition of the questions-based approach could actually lead to a diminution in quality in New South Wales, which until now has provided the best of the offerings to students.

Hopefully, the working party will at least give some consideration to what is surely an essential element of the history teaching process—namely, evaluating how learning about Australian history fits into the broader context of the history of the world. That broader history should not be forgotten as Australian children of the twenty-first century take their places in an increasingly globalised environment.

At present, it is possible for a student passing through the Australian school system to learn about Australia's contribution at Gallipoli, without gaining any knowledge of the broader First World War. Similarly, they might spend quite some time learning about racist treatment of the Chinese on Australian goldfields, without being given the opportunity to gain any appreciation of the significance of China as a country throughout history.

A layperson might conclude that this phenomenon is the result of Australian nationalists having gained control of the history curriculum. However, what it actually represents is that at all levels there is an excessive focus on the narrow rather than the broad.

This complaint is not confined to Australia. According to leading British historian David Starkey, history teaching in British schools is so fragmented that pupils are left with no understanding of the order in which important events occurred and little idea of what went before or after them. Starkey recently argued that 'there is no point in doing merely a fragment in time with no sense of what might have led up to

events and what consequences flowed from them'. By way of example he pointed out that the main A-Level history syllabus covering Hitler stops in 1939, thus leaving out World War II and the Holocaust.

According to Starkey, teachers focus far too much on historiography—the study of the way history is written—rather than history itself. Allied with this, the discovery method of teaching is used, which he says places far too much emphasis on the science of gathering evidence for historical events. He argues that the study of original documents and the search for evidence should not come until university level.

Teachers use the discovery method to teach when the Norman Conquest was. We know when it was. What's the point in having a teacher if not to tell the students what the facts are?

Of course, for many modern historians there are no facts, only a 'multiplicity of voices, competing narratives and diverse texts', as one Melbourne historian recently put it.

What is meant by 'multiplicity of voices' is in reality the pursuit of a rigid agenda of class, race, gender and environmental issues, usually applied to a particularly narrow field of study. A classic example of how these themes dominate the thinking of our professional historians was displayed in the book of essays, published in 2003, on the work of Geoffrey Blainey.

Six of the 14 essays by academic historians in *The Fuss that Never Ended* were attacks on Blainey for his alleged failures to spend enough time on Aboriginal issues, the environment, gender, British imperialism, labour history, and race. Blainey's value as a historian was challenged for failing to appreciate the centrality of each writer's historical theme to the telling of the Australian story. The great irony is, of course, that

Blainey's writings have covered a far broader canvas than the writers of these contributions put together.

Naturally, the academic historians in their university departments create courses and subjects around their special themes. While some of these subjects have interest and value, their dominance of the curriculum disenfranchises from the study of history all those who would prefer history presented differently, in particular, those looking for a narrative-based approach.

One of the key problems that the absence of narrative history creates was identified recently by Melleuish:

It is history as narrative, the interaction of human beings as they attempt to resolve problems and deal with each other, that draws so many people to a love of the subject.

With those potential historians alienated, we end up with a self-perpetuating cycle which leaves only those who feel comfortable with the modern academic orthodoxy pursuing further historical study at tertiary level, or teaching history at secondary level. Until the current orthodoxy is challenged, too many students will continue to be denied access to the facts, narratives and character studies that can make the study of history such an engrossing experience.

The evidence of the August 2006 History Summit is that the top-down approach to reform only has limited efficacy. Re-establishing a role for narrative history teaching in universities and schools will only come about from a long, slow grind from the dissident voices, who believe that learning history should be a pleasure, not a guilt-trip.

Professor Greg Melleuish will be a Visiting Scholar at the Institute of Public Affairs in 2007.

