Parents and schools should decide how to teach our national heritage, not Canberra

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The education minister Christopher Pyne has promised to review the Gillard Government’s National History Curriculum. But the curriculum doesn’t need to be reviewed. It needs to be scrapped.

The hostility towards the legacy of Western Civilisation in the National Curriculum’s history subject demonstrates the absurdity of having a centrally-mandated and government-controlled single curriculum.
Although there was a push for a national curriculum under Hawke and Keating throughout 1991-1993, it was ultimately the Howard government that made it possible. Ironically, we now have a far-left history curriculum because a conservative government was worried about the far left bias of existing state curriculums.

In 2006 Julie Bishop convened the National History Summit out of concern about the quality of teaching Australian history in schools. The Summit concluded that there was a need to restore a coherent and sequenced narrative of our national story to a central place in school curriculums, and Tony Taylor—a historian and education specialist from Monash University—was approached to draft Australia’s first ever national history curriculum.

The result was the *Guide to the Teaching of Australian History in Years 9 and 10*. Though initially drafted by Taylor, many changes were made to his draft before its completion. It took a chronological approach to the teaching of history (as opposed to a disjointed ‘depth’ approach), and outlined ten units covering Australian history to the present, beginning with ‘First peoples’ and ‘Early encounters’ and concluding with ‘Australia and the Shrinking Globe (1976-2000).’

The guide was released to the public on 11 October 2007. What happened to the history curriculum next—under the Rudd-Gillard Government—provides an insight into how the national history curriculum has been politicised, and will be politicised for as long as it exists.

In January 2008, Taylor remarked that the guide (which he had co-drafted) was as ‘dead as a doornail,’ and would be ‘dropped like a hot potato’ by the new government because it was too close to a nationalist view of Australia’s past.

Late in the same year, Julia Gillard created the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)—a statutory authority to develop a new national curriculum. Then shadow education minister Christopher Pyne worried that the curriculum was ‘in danger of becoming increasingly straddled with left-wing dogma’—but the Coalition supported the ACARA legislation anyway.

As it turns out, Pyne was right. In the Rudd-Gillard curriculum, ACARA shelved the chronological teaching of history (the chronological ‘Overview’ is supposed to take up just 10 per cent of total teaching time), and students are now required to choose between a succession of random, disconnected ‘depth’ units, which bear more resemblance to cultural studies than actual history. Worse, the curriculum leans towards a politically correct, distinctly leftist agenda, which places undue emphasis on concepts like ‘environmentalism,’ ‘socialism,’ and ‘multiculturalism,’ while denigrating the legacy and achievements of Western Civilisation.

Obviously, teaching awareness of other cultures and their own histories is a good thing. It is not a good thing, however, when this is done to the extent that it sidelines or denigrates our own history. The national history curriculum fails on this account. For example: Year Three students are expected to learn about ‘Community and Remembrance’ and complete units such as ‘the role that people of diverse backgrounds have played in the development and character of the local community.’ Nowhere is there a unit on the role that the
British and European settlers played in shaping the community. Similarly, students are expected to study ‘celebrations and commemorations in other places around the world … including those that are observed in Australia such as Chinese New Year, Christmas Day, Diwali, Easter, Hannukkah, the Moon Festival and Ramadan.’ Christmas Day and Easter are listed alongside Diwali and Ramadan as if they are of no extra significance — regardless of the fact that modern-day Australia, as a Western nation, owes far more to Christianity than any other religion … like it or not.

Yet, amid talk that another much-needed revision is imminent, various academics have claimed that Tony Abbott— to quote a Labor media release directly—intends ‘to Re-Write History Curriculum in his Own Image.’ Nobody has been more vocal than Tony Taylor. Ever since the Rudd-Gillard History Curriculum was made available to the public Taylor has issued a succession of essays and articles attacking the Coalition and the Institute of Public Affairs on this account.

Taylor wrote in a particularly scathing article in the Sydney Morning Herald,

In recent years The Australian, together with a small number of fellow conservative players, has been pushing an inaccurate and ill-informed campaign on how we understand our past.

The few—but noisy – Liberal figures in the campaign sail a Bunyanesque Sea of Knowledgeable Ignorance crying out ‘Magna Carta!', 'English Civil War!', 'Judeo-Christian tradition!' and 'Western civilisation' … during their fulminations, they count mentions of the curriculum of Aborigines as well as the names of conservative and ALP prime ministers and demand more emphasis on the heroic bits of Australian history.

If this blatant denial of the importance of the Magna Carta, the English Civil War, Judeo-Christian tradition and Western Civilisation seems absurd enough, it is even more absurd that elsewhere he even compares Tony Abbott to Vladimir Putin on account of his plans to scrap the existing history curriculum. He doesn’t bother to mention, of course, that Labor did the same to Howard’s history curriculum in 2008.

In an article published in History Australia in August 2013, he explained some of his frustration: ‘I was exasperated,’ he said,
‘by these IPA and Pyne advances into territory that was clearly quite beyond their ken, and I felt it was important to flush out their unfamiliarity with real history.’

‘Real’ history, Taylor says. But real according to whom? In fact, Taylor’s passage here illustrates the core of the problem with these so-called ‘curriculum wars’. At the centre is a group of left-leaning academics who believe they have the monopoly on history, and that only the professionals themselves can decide what is and is not ‘real’. And if they alone control what is real history—namely, disjointed multicultural history with a particular focus on social structures, gender, human rights, and environmentalism—then it follows that everyone with a different view of the past must be deceived by some kind of false history, and is therefore ignorant and uneducated.

According to them, they alone are honest and objective. Anyone who does not subscribe to their interpretation is labelled ‘rosy glow’ or nationalist—even if some of the dissidents also happen to be professional historians (for example, many of those who, like Geoffrey Blainey, attended the National History Summit under Howard in 2006).

It is exactly these self-proclaimed ‘real historians’ who recently came together to form a new association called Honest History. Despite this group’s motto—supporting balanced and honest history—it is obvious that this group has a clear political agenda. According to their own website, they were formed primarily to combat the rising tide of Anzac Day commemoration (which they consider ‘jingoism’, and perceive as a threat) and exalt the self-confessed radical and Soviet sympathiser Leslie Cyril Jauncey as one of their exemplars. Supporters include a number of academics who were involved in the drafting of the national curriculum, including Stuart Macintyre and, of course, Taylor.

What, then, can Pyne and Abbott do to re-balance the curriculum? True—they could order a revision of the entire history component. They could scrap the current one, and replace it with a more chronological, structured, and less eclectic succession of units. They could ensure that important features like the English Civil War, Western Civilisation, and the Judeo-Christian tradition get due attention.

But every time a new government comes into power, the old history curriculum—along with much of the rest of the curriculum—will be scrapped. The history curriculum will become the subject of an ongoing tug-of-war game.

Because history, by its very nature, is inherently political, it is highly unlikely that there will ever be a consensus between the two sides.

Just look at what has happened in nations that did implement a national curriculum—like the United Kingdom, or, to a lesser degree, the United States. Ever since these nations introduced core curricula, successive governments have altered them to suit their own needs on the basis that the previous ones had an undue bias in one way or the other.

There is no doubt that the Rudd-Gillard National Curriculum is slanted and badly needs to be fixed; but any ‘fix’ the Abbott Government makes will not be permanent—and nor should it be, since that is the nature of Australian democracy.

But there is little point in prolonging this so-called curriculum war, since it cannot be won by either side. The best and most permanent change the Coalition can make to the National Curriculum is to abolish it altogether, and distance politicians on both sides from school curriculum matters.