

CONCLUSION

Inheriting the nation

In June 2004 the Prime Minister, John Howard, and the federal Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, announced a new \$31 billion education package in which funding would be tied to a National Values Framework. The increased government support would be contingent on the implementation of several policy initiatives ‘that will underpin the Australian Government’s national priorities, shaping our schools over the next decade’. These requirements included a compulsory two hours of exercise for students every week, the adoption of a national safe schools framework and the installation of a ‘functioning flag pole’ to fly the Australian flag. ‘This is a major investment in Australia’s future,’ promised their joint media release. ‘It will leave us better equipped to face the global future and help us build on our long traditions of innovation and technical excellence.’¹

Although it was not made clear how the teaching and learning of such values might be undertaken, their importance was obvious: they would educate the nation, reporting measures would be in place to ensure that schools were being held accountable, and they were intrinsic to ‘Australia’s future’. The initiative was designed to support ‘Greater national consistency in schooling’, such as a standard school starting age and the promotion of educational standards. ‘Better reporting to parents’, ‘Transparency of school performance’ and

'Making values a core part of schooling' framed the policy. Moreover, 'Every school must have a functioning flag-pole, fly the Australian flag and display the values framework in a prominent place in the school, as a condition of funding'.²

The 'core values' and 'flagpoles' push came five months after the Prime Minister had criticised state schools for being 'too politically correct and too values-neutral'.³ He claimed that students were leaving the public school system because it failed to promote 'mainstream' Australian values. The acting Minister for Education, Peter McGauran, explained the government's position: 'There is a growing trend that is discernible to parents that too many government schools are either value-free, or are hostile or apathetic to Australian heritage and values.' 'Parents, a great many of them, are worried by a trend within some government schools away from the values that they want imparted to their children.'⁴ This framing of national education issues with the values of the nation itself echoed concern over the 'civics deficit' and was the latest debate over the teaching of Australian heritage and identity in schools. The nationalisation of strategies to tackle obesity, unify the school starting age and coordinate standards would go hand in hand with the nationalisation of so-called 'values'.

Many supported the government's public commitment. On the ABC online forum, 'husky65' maintained that the move would encourage Australian patriotism. 'I don't see a problem with giving proud Australian kids a chance to express that pride. I can see why a bitter, leftist teachers union would be opposed to such a basic idea, though.' Another, 'proud2baussie', agreed the initiative was a positive one: 'to dismiss this great idea is moronic. I totally support the concept and am proud to be Australian and show our symbols with pride.'⁵ Robert Buick wrote to the *Gold Coast Bulletin* and complained: 'Some Australians object to the flying of the nation's flag within government precincts including schools. To them I say this, "What's your heritage and why live here if you don't support our national emblem?" All nations fly their flag proudly and so should we.'⁶

Others were far from convinced. Polly Price wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and suggested that the Prime Minister 'make the overweight kids shin up the flagpole daily. That should do it.'⁷ Fiona Buchanan in the *Melbourne Age* was more critical: 'John Howard, education should not have conditions. It is essential, with or without a

functioning flagpole.’⁸ In Canberra, the Capital Territory’s Minister for Education, Katy Gallagher, and the Democrats Senator, Aden Ridgeway, claimed that regulations on flying the national flag would prevent schools flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags to promote reconciliation. A spokesperson for Brendan Nelson responded that although the Commonwealth would contribute \$1500 for each school to receive a single flagpole, multiple flagpoles would have to be paid for by the school.⁹

In New South Wales, Premier Carr responded to the values debate with reference to his government’s recent revisions of the mandatory Australian history syllabus. The State Government had been forced to listen to teachers’ concerns that the previous syllabus was loaded with content, he admitted, but together they had committed to conveying ‘to our young people in schools the allure of history’. ‘Patriotism comes from a knowledge of your country’s history and geography,’ Carr continued. The Federal Government would foster more patriotism by funding a ‘core library’ in every school of history, geography and culture ‘than buying a flagpole’.¹⁰

This was certainly a remarkable shift from Carr’s earlier attempts to prescribe core historical and civic knowledge in New South Wales schools. Carr had previously asserted that history teaching should include a ‘rigorous analysis of a narrative of unfolding major events’.¹¹ He now demanded plurality and perspective: ‘No-one wants to read boring tomes about civic progress,’ Carr maintained. ‘Our history is not a single story. They comprise many stories. Many stories comprise the Australian experience.’¹² Had he simply responded to the demands of the History Teachers’ Association, who pleaded for a more interesting and engaging syllabus? Was it a personal shift in historical ideals or a political manoeuvre? How we make sense of the Premier’s changing views may depend on how we make sense of the debate over history education more broadly: Carr’s response reveals how the lines between politics and pedagogy have become so blurred in this contest over Australian history.

Since the 1960s and 1970s history education has generated increasing public and professional concern. I chose this period because of its ‘change and continuity’, to paraphrase the language of syllabuses. It offered a distinct narrative of shifting historical and educational methods alongside emerging political and ideological

movements. It has also been characterised by significant repetition, whereby anxiety over the state of the subject and concern over 'standards' and 'relevance' continue to shape the discourse of history education.

The new pedagogies forced historical and educational approaches in schools to become more inclusive and relevant. A belief in social justice was a foundation of these child-centred education movements. Proponents insisted that the traditional subject orientation towards university entrance was narrowly academic and failed to accommodate growing numbers of students from a variety of social and educational backgrounds. Schools needed to prepare students for work and social participation as well as tertiary study.

Education and cognitive development were increasingly linked with wider social philosophies of equity and emancipation. The new, 'relevant' education was to be student-centred and life-centred: children became the focal point of the learning experience, their opinions needed to be better valued and understood, and personal development became an important educational goal. The ways in which the New History and Social Studies prioritised the child and its development revealed how their pedagogical instrumentalism was inseparable from progressive social and political beliefs.

These initial connections between the political and pedagogical valencies of history education formed an important base for further discussion and debate. Many felt the social ideals of the new pedagogies were detrimental to educational process: they would diminish academic standards and endanger the nation's most vulnerable citizens. Others maintained that new approaches to the past needed new approaches to teach them.

Since the 1960s and 1970s child-centred pedagogy has been read by a number of conservative critics as a 'new orthodoxy' inimical to educational standards and core national knowledge. The reaction of this 'Back to Basics' movement conflated progressive teaching methods with radical politics and was bolstered by repeated surveys that exposed the apparent historical ignorance of Australian students and a mounting civic 'deficit' among its citizens. This meant that although pleas for a more rigorous and accountable approach to history teaching shifted the meaning of 'relevance', the term continued to dominate public discourse of the subject.¹³

Since the 1990s the intersection between education and the national narrative has become more pressing. Disagreement over what history to teach and how to teach it generates considerable conflict in Australia and around the world. Following the publication of damning reports of young people's historical knowledge in Canada, the *Globe and Mail* (a Toronto broadsheet) worried that 'it is not students but Canadian history courses in our high schools that have failed. And it is that failure we as a nation cannot afford.'¹⁴ Writing for the *Calgary Herald*, Charles Frank contended that 'Our young people know virtually nothing about the history of the country they are about to inherit'.¹⁵

History teachers have also recognised the power of this rhetoric of national relevance, and their adoption of its discourse ties the subject to the nation more closely than ever. Mark Anderson wrote in *Teaching History* that history was relevant for the student and the nation. 'As the need for global effectiveness education gains momentum, history has the potential to shake off its tweed coat status and become one of the glamour disciplines,' he considered. 'Students should see history as being as vocationally oriented as business studies.'¹⁶

These debates over the importance of a relevant national literacy may be understood as part of the continuing struggle to define the nation's heritage and legacy. The capacity of history syllabuses and textbooks to convey national narratives to 'our children' makes them critical in this process that deems learning the nation's story essential for understanding and belonging to the nation itself. In this way, conflicts that emerge over history education reflect similar disputes over museum exhibits, national anniversaries and commemorations. Each is a powerful site of historical contest and controversy.

The polarisation of these historical debates is captured and reinforced by the metaphors that have come to describe them. The 'History Wars' and 'Black Armband' imagery pervade public discourse and are the primary signifiers for this mounting anxiety over the past. The language and content of history syllabuses has been just as contested, so that disputes over the use of 'invasion' or 'settlement' frame history education within the increasingly familiar paradigm of historical opposition.

A number of historians have explained such conflicts in historical interpretation in terms of the politics of memory. Contrasting readings of Australia's Bicentennial celebrations and the protests they

provoked in 1988 provide a noteworthy example here. The heated debate over the *Enola Gay* exhibition in the USA revealed similarly how interpretations of the past are so fraught with anxiety and unease. Such analysis highlights how contested and difficult the process of defining the nation's heritage and identity can be. It also begins to theorise the process of coming to terms with that past, and explains why the construction of national narratives is so powerful and contested. With its similar capacity to define the nation's story, history education is another critical site of contested collective memory.

'Teaching the nation' is also a pedagogical concern, however, so that contrasting readings of the past are further complicated by questions of historical method and approach. The editorial in the first edition of *Agora* in 1967 lamented that 'whether we like it or not, history in the schools appears to be under attack'.¹⁷ In 1974 a history teacher, Lloyd Evans, worried that 'the most crushing argument' against the subject was 'its supposed "irrelevance" compared with the relevance of the social sciences to the students' interest in contemporary history and their needs as future citizens'.¹⁸ The continued level of professional discussion over history's status and how it should be taught demonstrates the substance of this educational engagement. Teachers have been prominent in debates over whether to teach history as a discrete or integrated discipline, and their responses to the provision of history within SOSE act as a reminder to the professional concern over the subject's standing in schools.¹⁹

The provision of compulsory civics and citizenship in history aroused even greater reaction from teachers and educationists. They acknowledged its potential to strengthen history's status but were concerned that any mandating of the subject would reduce its appeal and signal a return to rote learning. Teachers' contributions to Christine Halse's 1997 report into the state of history in New South Wales and Tony Taylor's 2000 publication of the National Inquiry into School History highlighted this pedagogical alarm. They confirmed that disagreements over what stories to include in syllabuses and textbooks were complicated by questions of educational and historical approach; the anxiety over the past has been intensified by anxiety over how to teach it.²⁰

Although the politics of collective memory provide a framework for historical disagreement and dispute, anxiety over teaching the

national narrative in schools is also characterised by a methodological preoccupation that operates beyond its established partisan political divide. The History Wars are complicated in the schools arena, where 'our children' have become the focus of debate.

Notes

- ¹ *Values Education Study Final Report* (Carlton South, Vic: Curriculum Corporation, 2003); *A Draft National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* (Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004); Andrew Fraser, 'Parents fly the way on poles', *Canberra Times*, 29 June 2004; John Howard and Brendan Nelson, 'The Australian Government's agenda for schools—Achievement through choice and opportunity' (Brendan Nelson Media Centre, 2004).
- ² Howard and Nelson, 'The Australian Government's agenda for schools'.
- ³ Mark Riley, Linda Doherty and Kelly Burke, 'Backlash over PM's attack on public schools', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 January 2004. See also editorial, 'An uneducated guess about school values', *Age*, 22 January 2004.
- ⁴ Cited in Chee Chee Leung, Orietta Guerrero, with Annabel Crabb, 'Private, public schools hit PM', *Age*, 21 January 2004; Riley, 'Backlash over PM's attack on public schools'.
- ⁵ *ABC Online Forum* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 23 June 2004 [cited 20 July 2004]); available from <http://www2b.abc.net.au/news/forum/newsonline1/archives/archive29/default.shtm>.
- ⁶ Robert Buick, letter, *Gold Coast Bulletin*, 26 June 2004.
- ⁷ Polly Price, letter, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 June 2004.
- ⁸ Fiona Buchanan, letter, *Age*, 26 June 2004.
- ⁹ 'Too few poles to go round under protocols', *Canberra Times*, 23 June 2004.
- ¹⁰ Bob Carr, 'Welcome address' (paper presented at Visions: 12th Biennial National Conference of the Australian Historical Association, Newcastle, 5–9 July 2004).
- ¹¹ Carr, 'Carr on history', 18.
- ¹² Carr, 'Welcome address'.
- ¹³ For example, Donnelly, 'The new orthodoxy in English teaching: A critique'.
- ¹⁴ Joanne Harris Burgess, 'Low marks in Canadian history', *Globe and Mail*, 4 January 1997.
- ¹⁵ Charles Frank, 'Does anyone know what it means to be Canadian?', *Calgary Herald*, 28 June 1997.
- ¹⁶ Anderson, 'History—The future glamour discipline': 47.
- ¹⁷ Editorial, 'Attack and defence'.
- ¹⁸ Lloyd Evans, 'History—Where next?', *Australian History Teacher*, no. 1 (1974): 4–8.
- ¹⁹ For example, see the debate in *AHA Bulletin* (nos 87–9) that began with Ryan's article, 'Developing a strategy to save history'. See also AHA Working Party, 'AHA submission to the National Inquiry into School History', *AHA Bulletin*, no. 90 (2000): 49–51.
- ²⁰ Halse et al., *The State of History in New South Wales*; Taylor, *Future of the Past*.