

The Australian History Summit

Parliament House, Canberra 17 August 2006

One Participant's View of Proceedings, Outcomes and Implications

In January this year, the Prime Minister, speaking at the Press Club in Canberra on 25 January, issued a call for a “root and branch renewal” of the teaching of Australian history in the nation’s schools. According to the Prime Minister, such history had become victim of postmodern relativism, and had lost a hard underpinning of facts and dates, and also an emphasis on narrative.

The (newly-appointed) Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training, Julie Bishop, obviously took the Prime Minister’s words to heart: in April, she added Australian History to the list of subjects (Physics, Chemistry, English Literature and Mathematics) to be examined for comparability of standards across educational jurisdictions at year 12 level. At the time, DEST officials described this as the Minister’s “first response” to the Prime Minister’s Australia Day speech.

The recently concluded History Summit is the second, and potentially far more substantial, response by Ms Bishop to the PM’s speech. The summit consisted of 23 ‘summitteers’ – a collection of academics specialising in Australian history, Indigenous academics, ‘social commentators’, teacher educators, curriculum experts and teachers. In fact, in the strict sense – of people who are still in the classroom – only three of the 23 were teachers. These were Andrew Barnett from Victoria, David Boon (a primary teacher) from Tasmania, and myself, from the ACT.

Two papers were commissioned by DEST for the summit. The first of these was *An Overview of the Teaching and Learning of Australian History in Schools*, prepared by Associate Professor Tony Taylor of Monash University (along with an appendix about 2.5 cm thick, of curriculum documentation from around the country). The second, *The Teaching of Australian History in Australian Schools: a Normative View* was authored by Associate Professor Gregory Melluish from the University of Wollongong. These papers can be accessed at

http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/policy_initiatives_reviews/key_issues/Australian_History_Summit/Default.htm. These papers played a key role in shaping the summit’s discussions.

At a dinner for the summitteers and assorted dignitaries before the summit, Ms Bishop outlined her view of what was wrong with the teaching of Australian history in schools. She commenced by noting the different places of history in schools between Australia and the USA: “...[US children learn] the basics about important Americans in first grade...[a] fourth grade history book...[tells] the national story”. She further opined “I believe there is a body of historical knowledge which should be taught to all Australian students”. The Minister clearly identified the purposes of the summit: to strengthen the teaching of Australian history in schools and to sketch the essential narrative for a model Australian history curriculum.

Next morning, after the inevitable ‘photo opportunities’ for the media, the summit commenced. After a brief address by the Prime Minister, and another by the Minister (both of whom stressed that the aim of the summit was not to develop an official history for schools), we got down to business. The first session focussed on the current state of history in schools, using the findings reported by Prof Tony Taylor. It also made suggestions about how the teaching of history in schools could be strengthened (see below). This session established the three key criteria for developing a model curriculum: that it must be teachable; that it must be do-able (in terms of school timetables and other structural issues); and that it must be sustainable. The criteria were the brainchild of Prof Taylor, and were readily accepted by the summit. Given the nature of the people selected to attend the summit, the main recommendation of this session - that Australian history should be a core subject - is hardly surprising.

The second and third sessions focussed on *what* should be taught, concentrating on the period c 45 000 years ago to c1900 (to be taught in Year 9?), and the 20th Century (to be taught in Year 10?). The sheer size of the task was daunting, and made reaching a consensus difficult. However Prof John Hirst (Latrobe University) cut through the Gordian knot by suggesting the development of a series of broad questions to underpin and focus the curriculum. We also worked on identifying a set of key dates. Neither of these tasks was completed, and a small sub-committee of the summit was established to finish off the work.

The summit, indeed, ran out of time, but achieved much. Unfortunately, the whole question of what should be taught in the primary years, and up to the end of year 8, was rather glossed over. The summit concentrated on years 9 and 10, and also agreed that curriculum for years 3-8 needed to support year 9 and 10 studies, to avoid the repetition that has been an unfortunate feature of too many students' experiences of the past.

One participant – Assoc Prof Melluish - has since opined that we threw up our hands and defaulted to the lowest common denominator of Australian history. I would strongly disagree. Prof Melluish's paper was commendable for the breadth of vision that it displayed, but it failed the criterion of "do-able": conservative estimates of time required to cover the content he recommended varied from 400 to upwards of 500 hours of teaching time - not feasible in a crowded curriculum. There was a pleasing focus on the practical through out the day, and the 'broad questions' approach maintained the presence of narrative.

The recommendations of the summit are summarised in the Communiqué, which can be found at <http://www.dest.gov.au/Ministers/Media/Bishop/2006/08/b002170806.asp>. These were, in outline:

- that Australian history should be taught in year 9 and 10 as a core and separate subject
- that the teaching of Australian history needs to be revitalised
- the three criteria listed above
- the importance of significant events, of the global context in which Australia exists, of "everyday experience", and of chronology
- that a model curriculum should be based on sound educational principles of historical literacy
- the need for quality resources to underpin the teaching of Australian history, and for quality professional learning for teachers
- the formation of a working party to finish the summit's progress towards identifying a set of important dates and a series of questions to underpin a model curriculum
- that all Education ministers pursue the goals laid out by the summit.

Obviously, the long-term outcomes of the summit will be dependant on political processes within the Commonwealth government, and between the Commonwealth and States/Territories. Given the size of the purse which the Commonwealth holds the strings for, it is likely that some Australian history will appear in years 9 and/or 10. What was particularly heartening was the recognition of the need for both quality resources, and, more importantly, professional learning for teachers.

If (when?) history (re)appears as a stand-alone subject, qualified and trained history teachers will not appear by magic. Perhaps the biggest challenge ahead is to build the capacity of our colleagues so that they will not be asked to launch into teaching in an area where they may feel under-skilled or lacking in knowledge. Only if teacher professionals have the training, knowledge and skills they need, can this initiative have any chance of being successful.