

# Reviewing history: Whose interpretation do we go by?

DATE: WEDNESDAY, 27 JUNE 2007

*Nick Ewbank, president, History Teachers' Association of Australia*

The [appointment of a panel to review the draft model Australian History curriculum](#) prepared by Prof Tony Taylor is an interesting one. Julie Bishop's office has offered the opinion that this review is part of a standard procedure for any work of this kind. Commentators and academic historians have reacted to the four-person membership of the panel – Dr Gerard Henderson, Prof Geoffrey Blainey, Dr Nick Brown and Ms Jennifer Lawless.

Prof Blainey's appointment was probably inevitable, given his status as, arguably, Australia's most eminent senior historian. Ms Lawless is an excellent choice, given her knowledge and expertise in both history and curriculum. Dr Henderson's appointment has raised the most eyebrows. Commentators from outside south-eastern Australia have also noted that the panel is comprised solely of representatives from Victoria and New South Wales.

However, this panel is well constituted – three of the four (the exception is Dr Brown) were "summiteers" at the August 2006 Australian History Summit, and Dr Brown is a noted academic historian.

Of more concern is the reason for the review at all. Associate Professor Taylor's draft captured the outcomes of both the summit and the working party (which was set up by the summit). Why, then, the need for a review?

Does the Government wish to modify the findings of its own process? Or is it, as Julie Bishop's office states, merely a standard review procedure? Time will tell, but the matter is raising concerns among the history community. Is the Government going to, holus bolus, adopt a NSW-type of approach to the teaching of history in our schools (100 examinable facts in 100 hours)?

The coverage of the model curriculum is [inaccurately described in today's Australian newspaper](#). It does not enable teachers to 'ignore' topics such as Gallipoli. What it does allow is for teacher judgement to inform what should be *emphasised* in the classroom. Education is only successful when students are engaged; teachers are in the best place to judge how to engage their students.

Indeed, the draft model curriculum should not be described as too progressive – it captures the findings and the consensus of the summit neatly. All the “old favourites” are represented (eg Gallipoli, squatters, World War 2), within a framework that makes the content “doable, teachable and sustainable”.

Traditional views of the teaching of history – eg kings and queens, lists of dates and a single, agreed narrative – have been superseded. One of the strengths of history as a discipline is that it is contestable – you have to weigh evidence to find out “what really happened”, not merely read a textbook interpretation of it.

Yes, facts (and dates) are important. Yes, there should be some ‘established certainties’. But there are spaces between those certainties – and those spaces are often the most interesting, the most thought provoking – to explore with students.

History isn’t a dry and remote subject. It should be examined for what it can suggest about the world which we inhabit *now*, as well as the world that was inhabited in the past – and it may even have something to say about the future!

The model curriculum prepared by Prof Taylor allowed this to happen. If the review committee turns into a revision committee, of the type feared by some commentators and the history community, then nothing will have been achieved. The process of the Australian History Summit will be scrapped, and there will be a real danger of a curriculum that is neither teachable nor doable, let alone sustainable!

[ Original URL: <http://www.crikey.com.au/Politics/20070627-Reviewing-history-whose-interpretation-do-we-go-by.html> ]