

Rewriting History

By Glenn Davies

3 February 2014



Federal education minister Christopher Pyne appears to have reignited the History Wars with a call to rewrite the newly-minted national history curriculum to remove alleged left-wing bias. History editor – and history teacher – [Dr Glenn Davies](#) says how history is taught in Australian schools should not depend on who is running the country.

HISTORY TEACHERS around the country returned to school last week faced with uncertainty around the delivery of the new first-ever national history curriculum.

After eight years of consultations, the national history curriculum has been adopted by states around the country. For the first time since compulsory schooling began in the 1870s, every school across the country will follow the same history curriculum from Prep to Year 10. But now, new Federal Education Minister [Christopher Pyne](#) wants to rewrite the national history curriculum for

Australian students, declaring they are being taught too many left-wing values.

The 2000s was the decade when there had been attacks and defences on what history was taught in schools and universities and the way in which it was taught. It looks like it's back again.

On 10 January 2014, Minister Pyne announced a review of the Australian Curriculum as part of the Coalition's *Students First* policy.

In his press release, Mr Pyne stated that the Australian Curriculum had been heavily criticised over a '*lengthy period of time*' and identified concerns about it being overcrowded and overly prescriptive. He argued the national history curriculum had been criticised for not having '*sold or talked about the benefits of western civilizations*'. He has called for a balanced curriculum that '*tells the truth of the way we've treated Indigenous Australians*' and celebrates the national story.

In response, Minister Pyne announced that [two critics of the current curriculum](#) – former teacher and ex-Liberal Party staffer [Kevin Donnelly](#), and University of Queensland [Professor Ken Wiltshire](#) – would be appointed to review what is taught in Australian schools amid fears a '[cultural Left](#)' agenda is failing students.

The pale, male, celebratory view of Australian history

For a long time – from the earliest European settlement until the 1960s – most Australians embraced a 'celebratory' view of Australian history.

History texts, especially those used in schools, provided a rich narrative of progress and achievement. Heroes abounded. They were explorers, settlers, miners, workers, farmers and soldiers — and almost all were white and male.

Challenging the tradition

In 1968, this celebratory tradition was challenged.

[On ABC Radio](#), anthropologist [W.E.H. Stanner](#) delivered a lecture called 'The Great Australian Silence'. In it, he lamented the way Australian history had ignored the plight of Aboriginal people, but he noted the "cult of forgetfulness" was being challenged by university and research institutes, full of young people working actively to end it. Stanner's prediction of a flurry of research activity certainly came true, with ground-breaking books being written by historians such as Charles Rowley, Lyndall Ryan and Henry Reynolds.

In 1988, Australians marked the bicentenary of European settlement.

Alongside the celebrations were others urging Australians to remember that 'White Australia has a Black History'. Four years later, on 10 December 1992, Prime Minister [Paul Keating](#) made an extraordinary speech in Redfern marking the opening of Australian celebrations of the 1993 International Year of the World's Indigenous People in which he stated

"... the starting point might be to recognize that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians."

Keating's speech fanned the flames of the already smoldering debate about Australian history.

Black armband versus three cheers

In the 1993 Latham Lecture, eminent historian [Geoffrey Blainey](#) described the '[black armband](#)' view of history:

To some extent my generation was reared on the Three Cheers view of history. This patriotic view of our past had a long run. It saw Australian history as largely a success. While the convict era was a source of shame or unease, nearly everything that came after was believed to be pretty good ...

There is a rival view, which I call the Black Armband view of history. In recent years it has assailed the optimistic view of history. The black armbands were quietly worn in official circles in 1988, the bicentennial year ...

The multicultural folk busily preached their message that until they arrived much of Australian history was a disgrace. The past treatments of Aborigines, of Chinese, of Kanakas, of non-British migrants, of women, they very old, the very young, and the poor was singled out, sometimes legitimately, sometimes not ...

My friend and undergraduate teacher Manning Clark, who was almost the official historian in 1988, had done much to spread the gloomy view and also the compassionate view with his powerful prose and Old Testament phrases ...

To some extent the Black Armband view of history might well represent the swing of the pendulum from a position that had been too favourable, too self-congratulatory, to an opposite extreme that is even more unreal and decidedly jaundiced.

Howard's history wars

Then on 18 November 1996, Prime Minister [John Howard](#) entered the History Wars debate in his Sir Robert Menzies Lecture:

This 'black armband' view of our past reflects a belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination.

I take a very different view. I believe that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we can be ashamed.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Australian public life had been preoccupied as never before with arguments about the past.

The 1990s had been a period when Indigenous history had been launched into mainstream public debate. This debate had begun with the [Mabo](#) and [Wik](#) native title decisions of the early 1990s, and continued with the [Stolen Generation](#) investigations of the latter 1990s.

On 8 November 2001, mid-way through Howard's time as prime minister, the Australian Governor-General [Sir William Deane](#) made a dramatic statement about Australia's past during his [Sydney Peace Prize Lecture](#) at the University of Sydney. He claimed that the "past oppression and injustice" suffered by Indigenous Australians "remain part of the very fabric of our country". Thus, he said, they "demand redress and reconciliation in the future".

The Governor-General's comments added fuel to the debate about whether the Aboriginal people of Australia deserved an apology for past "oppression and injustice".

A year earlier, at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, the band [Midnight Oil](#) had made a very public call for reconciliation and an apology. During their performance at the closing ceremony, the band wore outfits emblazoned with the word 'sorry'. Many Australians applauded. Many others criticized the band.

In response to [Keith Windschuttle](#)'s claims in [The Fabrication of Aboriginal History](#) in 2002 that historians of Indigenous Australia, in particular [Henry Reynolds](#), were highly inaccurate in their accounts on Aboriginal massacres, there was significant public debate within Australia's historical profession.

In the last years of the Howard government, the History Wars were fought on several fronts.

There were vehement opinion pieces in newspapers and journals, spirited debates on radio and television, and a flurry of book publishing. In 2003, Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark opened *The History Wars* with a statement by John Howard after he won government in 1996:

"... one of the more insidious developments in Australian political life over the past decade or so has been the attempt to rewrite Australian history in the service of a partisan political cause."

Howard's historical revisionism

In John Howard's later years as Prime Minister, the [History Wars](#) focused on his move to produce a national Australian History curriculum. In a speech on the eve of Australia Day 2006, Howard called for "root and branch renewal" of history teaching in Australian schools and proposed some new directions.

He criticised the fact that there was "no structured narrative" to the teaching of history in most Australian schools and stated:

"I think we have taught history as some kind of fragmented stew of themes and issues, rather than some kind of proper narrative."

Too often in history classrooms, he claimed, "any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated" – a clear reference to the "three cheers/black armband" debates.

On 18 July 2006, the then Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, [Julie Bishop](#) announced there would be an [Australian History Summit](#) to discuss the teaching of Australian History in schools, to which she would invite some leading Australian historians and public figures who promote the study of history, as well as educational leaders, to participate in the summit in Canberra on

17 August 2006.

As the 2007 Federal election approached, the government promised a core course in Australian history for all students.

On Thursday, 11 October 2007, the then Prime Minister John Howard launched the '[Guide to the Teaching of Australian History in Years 9 and 10](#)'. It was disappointing to discover that the time and effort which had gone into the consultation process had been ignored in favour of a heavily content-laden document. The document outlined a course, to be taught over at least 150 hours in the two years, as a separate discipline-based subject. The proposed course included roughly 70 milestones, 9 major topics and 9 perspectives.

Reviving the history wars

In 2008, the new Rudd Government affirmed its plan to include History as a new compulsory core curriculum from Prep to Year 10 for all Australian schools, becoming eventually the current [Australian Curriculum: History](#).

In October 2008, Tony Abbot was already [making complaints](#) there were not enough facts about English history in the framing paper on school history. However by 2010 it had become clear the new national history curriculum was designed with a [global history focus](#) and had stepped away from the divisive 'black armband' approach to teaching Australia's past, setting out a [course of study](#) that allows students to look at the nation's story from the Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspective.

During the prolonged 2013 Federal election, the old History War debates re-emerged.

The '[first shot](#)' came in April 2013 from then Shadow Federal Minister for Education Christopher Pyne, who raised the old spectre of 'black armband' history. In the days before the September 2013 Federal election, Opposition Leader [Tony Abbott](#) joined the debate, criticizing the *Australian Curriculum: History* for

"... too great a focus on issues which are the predominant concern of one side of politics – in particular a focus on trade union history and Indigenous history."

Christopher Pyne stated that if Tony Abbott won the 14 September 2013 election, [rewriting aspects](#) of the curriculum that present "a black armband view of Australia's history" would immediately commence.

And on 10 January 2014, it did.

Cultural warriors and the "new" review

Eight years ago, on the eve of Australia Day 2006, then Prime Minister John Howard called for "root and branch renewal" of history teaching in Australian schools. This has undoubtedly happened. The *Australian Curriculum: History* has been agreed to by all states and is being implemented during the next week by history teachers all around the country. And yet Minister Pyne still advocates for a history curriculum free of partisan bias and has appointed Keven Donnelly and Ken Wiltshire to identify such areas and rectify them.

The days of unquestioning celebration of the past are over. Rather than accepting such stories, students construct their knowledge of the past through careful inquiry.

It appears Minister Pyne and his conservative cultural warrior view of history reflects how history was taught before the 1970s.

The 'old history' was where students learned about human events, achievements and traditions. History was an undisputed chronological narrative of past events where students learned 'what happened' and accepted the facts as conveyed by teachers and textbooks. Through learning history, mainstream values such as loyalty and obedience were inculcated in students. Pyne's 'three cheers' celebratory history is one that favours the Judeo-Christian ethic and Australia's British inheritance.

The 'new history' has students learn about events, achievements and traditions from around the globe, and about the lives of 'ordinary' people. History students realize that the 'truth' about the past is elusive. They acknowledge the tentative nature of our knowledge of the past. They ask what happened, why and with what effects — and they realize that different people will come up with different answers to those questions).

'New History' students investigate, posing questions and then seeking answers using historical sources of evidence and history students now investigate values, realizing that they are debatable and begin to refine their own values. These changes have brought school history more into line with the way historians study the past.

Just like an historian, history students undertaking research today will decide first to focus on something in the past, they then will pose a question to pursue, seek sources of evidence about the event, then read, interpret, evaluate and 'weigh up' the evidence, construct an answer to their original question, explain their decision, and finally acknowledge that other historians might disagree.

History is the narrative sum of us, our collective story in which there is always another version. The story changes depending on who is telling it.

So, who owns the past? Should the history we teach in our schools be the history that the government in power at any given time chooses to advocate?

The answer is, of course, no. Curriculum development should be left to the professionals — teachers.

The 'new history' (that has been around for 30 years) is based on critical thinking and primary source analysis and as such is neither 'white blindfold' nor 'black armband'. It is not teachers who display partisan bias, it is politicians. If teachers did, there would be complaints from parents and students. Rather, teachers engage students in an exploration of historical sources with differing perspectives and views. It is then up to

students to evaluate, interpret and determine an historical position.

The teaching of history is – and should remain – open to debate.

The originals of [John Graham's art](#), featured above as well as elsewhere on IA, are available for purchase by contacting the editor at editor@independentaustralia.net.

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