From the desk of John Roskam, Executive Director

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The Hon Peter Garrett AM, MP PO Box 249 Maroubra, NSW 2035

Dear Mr Garrett,

Why is the legacy of Western Civilisation missing from Australia's National Curriculum?

I know how busy you are. I've worked for federal and state politicians. I know how the urgent drives out the important.

You don't have time to think about how debates over royal prerogative in England in the 1600s have shaped Australian parliamentary democracy in 2011. You're more concerned with getting a new set of traffic lights installed outside a primary school in your electorate. That's perfectly understandable. (I've got children in primary school myself and as a constituent getting traffic lights outside a school is exactly the sort of thing I want my MP to be doing.)

But even if you don't have the time to read over what's in the new National Curriculum get someone in your office to spend fifteen minutes doing so. Ask them to look at the proposed History curriculum in particular. It's a public document. It's available at www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/History/Curriculum/F-10.

The History curriculum is important because what students learn about the past shapes how they think of the present and the future. And when those students become adults how they think of the past, present, and future shapes our community, our society, and our country.

Australia's education ministers have decided there will be a single National Curriculum for Australia. The National Curriculum

dictates what every Australian student (regardless of whether they are in a government or a non-government school) is taught up to Year 10. The plan of the ministers is that by the end of 2013 the National Curriculum for English, Mathematics, Science, and History will have been substantially implemented.

According to the government organisation responsible for writing and implementing the National Curriculum, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, the curriculum is needed to tackle "complex environmental, social and economic pressures, such as climate change..."

It's no exaggeration to say the National Curriculum is a document giving politicians enormous power over the lives of the country's citizens. The National Curriculum helps shape what people think. Eventually every single Australian will have been taught according to what's in the National Curriculum.

The fact that the National Curriculum helps determine what people think is explicitly recognised in the National Curriculum. At page 10 of the History curriculum it is stated in black and white:

history provides content that supports the development of students' world views, particularly in relation to actionsthat require judgment about past social systems and access to and use of the Earth's resources. [emphasis added]

The National Curriculum goes on to explain how the History curriculum "provides opportunities for students to develop an historical perspective on sustainability by understanding, for example...the overuse of natural resources, the rise of environmental movements and the global energy crisis..."

Two things are noteworthy about this passage. First, it is a clear statement of the ideological intent of the History curriculum, namely to teach students about 'the overuse of natural resources' and the 'global energy crisis.' The second point is that the curriculum automatically assumes natural resources have been overused and there is a global energy crisis. According to the National Curriculum there's no room for debate about these

issues, and students are not allowed to come to their own conclusions.

There are many other examples where the ideologically-driven nature of the National Curriculum is apparent. Let me give you just one more, it is also found on page 10 of the History curriculum.

The National Curriculum attempts to educate students for 'sustainability,' which means such education:

...is futures-oriented, focusing on protecting environments and creating a more ecologically and socially just world through action that recognises the relevance and interdependence of environmental, social, cultural and economic considerations. [emphasis added]

Whether students should be educated to create a 'socially just world' is, to say the least, a highly contentious and contested proposition. It is also a highly political statement that reflects a particular philosophical predisposition. The creation of a "socially just world" is a utopian vision usually associated with those on the left of the political spectrum.

The suggestion that Australian schools should create a "just society" is found in many other places throughout the materials associated with the National Curriculum.

I don't think it is too strong to say that the National Curriculum is trying to change the purpose of education.

For the National Curriculum and its designers, schooling is no longer about teaching children, imparting knowledge, and equipping young people to draw their own conclusions.

Instead, schooling as conceived by the National Curriculum is about producing ethical citizens, determined to create a socially just world.

Many Australians would find it remarkable that the National Curriculum should attempt to bring about a "socially just world". Many Australians would also find it remarkable that until now,

this attempt has gone largely unnoticed.

Which is why I'm writing to you. And why I'm writing to every elected representative in the Commonwealth Parliament and in the State and Territory Parliaments.

And that's why I'm enclosing with this letter a copy of a new book by the Institute of Public Affairs and the Mannkal Economic Education Foundation.

The book is entitled *The National Curriculum - A Critique*. In it seven different authors examine how the National Curriculum either ignores or disparages the foundations of Western Civilisation, and how the National Curriculum gives students a distorted and ideologically-driven picture of global and Australian history.

The legacy of Western Civilisation is rich, complex, and essential.

Ideals such as democracy, the rule of law, individual rights and responsibilities, civil society, economic freedom, and religious pluralism are the legacy of Western Civilisation and are the foundation of modern Australia. It is impossible to understand and to value our nation without an appreciation of the thousands of years of history of Western Civilisation.

Western cultural and political thought has its origins in the development of Judeo-Christian history. Our ideas about human rights are grounded in Christian theology. Classical Greece, Republican Rome, medieval Cordoba, and eighteenth century Edinburgh are some of the sites where the Western tradition was built. The Renaissance formed our cultural heritage. The Age of Discovery brought the spirit of inquiry and rationalism. The Scientific Revolution produced empiricism. The Enlightenment helped defined liberal and democratic values. The Industrial Revolution provided the basis for our material prosperity.

If Australian students are to appreciate their country and to face the challenges of the future it is essential they understand the foundations of the modern world.

But the National Curriculum fails to teach Australian students

about the legacy of Western Civilisation.

If the National Curriculum is implemented as proposed Australian students - and eventually all Australians - will no longer know about the strengths of their own society.

Some of the problems the *The National Curriculum - A Critique* identifies include how the National Curriculum:

- ignores the influence of Christianity
- neglects Australia's role in developing the principles of democratic liberalism in the 1800s
- presents a narrow and politically partisan assessment of the concept of human rights
- is hostile to the role of private enterprise and capitalism
- adopts a postmodern approach to the teaching of English.

The National Curriculum - A Critique was launched in Melbourne by the federal Shadow Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne on 31 January this year.

In his speech the shadow minister suggested the National Curriculum should make reference to, among other things, the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, and the English Civil War.

The suggestion that Australian school students should learn about the English Civil War was rubbished by Associate Professor Tony Taylor of the Faculty of Education at Monash University in an article he wrote on the website *Crikey*, that appeared on the day of the launch of *The National Curriculum - A Critique*.

What Associate Professor Taylor wrote is revealing and speaks volumes about the ideological underpinnings of the National Curriculum.

According to his university website, Associate Professor Tony Taylor was from 2006 to 2010 a "senior consultant with successive Coalition and ALP federal governments in formulating three drafts of a national history curriculum". He has also "developed

national professional standards for the teaching and learning of history."

Associate Professor Tony Taylor is one of Australia's most important history educators and one of the architects of the National Curriculum for history.

Of the English Civil War he said,

...[it] is arguably just a series of confused and confusing localised squabbles that may have a special significance for UK history, but not for anybody else (unless they like dressing up in period costume).

Such a view is, frankly, astonishing.

What Associate Professor Taylor said about the English Civil War demonstrates how much Australia's cultural and political heritage is being evaporated. There'll come a day when an entire generation of Australians will never have heard of Charles I, or Oliver Cromwell, and they won't know about the origins of the essential feature of the political system of their own country, namely parliamentary democracy.

This is what Winston Churchill said about the English Civil War in his A History of the English-Speaking Peoples.

[after 1660]...everyone now took it for granted that the Crown was the instrument of Parliament and the King the servant of his people.

If the doctrine of Divine Right was again proclaimed, that of Absolute Power had been abandoned. The criminal jurisdiction of the Privy Council, the Star Chamber, and the High Commission Court were gone. The idea of the Crown levying taxes without the consent of the Parliament or by ingenious and questionable devices had vanished. All legislation henceforward stood upon the majorities of legally elected Parliaments, and no royal ordinance could resist or replace it. [emphasis added]

The English Civil War established the very principles of

Australia's political system.

Paul Johnson in his A History of the English People writes that the consequences of the English Civil War reached far beyond England. "The revolutionaries in America, in France, and in Tsarist Russia were to inherit a distinguished revolutionary corpus of theory and experience, ultimately derived from England."

Johnson makes another point about the English Civil War. The 'Putney Debates' in 1647 between the members of Ireton's and Cromwell's New Model Army:

...proceeded to invent modern politics - to invent, in fact, the public framework of the world in which nearly 3,000 million people now live...Every major political concept known to us today, all the assumptions which underlie the thoughts of men in the White House, or the Kremlin, or Downing Street, or in presidential mansions or senates or parliaments through five centuries, were expressed or adumbrated in the little church of St Mary [where the Debates were held].

Lest it be thought it's only 'conservatives' like Churchill and Johnson who believe the English Civil War is one of the single most important events in world history. I want to quote the famous English Marxist historian (and member of the Communist Party of Great Britain) Christopher Hill, from his *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714*.

A great revolution in human thought dates from these decades [1640s] - the general realisation, which the Levellers, Hobbes, and Harrington summed up, that solutions to political problems might be reached by discussion and argument; that questions of utility and expediency were more important than theology or history, that neither antiquarian research nor searching the Scriptures was the best way to bring peace, order, and prosperity to the commonwealth. It was so great an intellectual revolution that it is difficult for us to conceive how men thought before it was made. [emphasis added]

Closer to home, here in Australia, Professor John Keane is a Professor of Politics at The University of Sydney. In *The Life* and Death of Democracy published in 2009 he puts his perspective on the consequences of the death of Charles I:

The public trial and execution of Charles I proved fatal to this type of regime [one based on Divine Right]. Assassins and court murderers could strike down monarchs in private, but putting a king on trial and executing him before an open-mouthed public killed two bodies, that of the king and that of the God-given body politic. Government was hereafter open in principle to all and sundry and - more radically - power relations were consequently seen not as divine, or as symbolically linked to an individual of royal birth. Matters to do with who got what, when and how were seen as contingent: as up for grabs, as depending on human judgements and actions, preferably by a government of elected representatives enjoying the support of all its citizens. [emphasis added]

The human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson in his history of the trial of Charles I credits the English Civil War with another consequence. It was the trial and execution of a tyrannical king that gave birth to the concept of international human rights law, and in particular the precedent of prosecuting a head of state.

Cooke's [the lawyer prosecuting Charles I] case against the King was the first modern legal argument against tyranny - based (as Bush and Blair might more credibly have based their case against Saddam Hussein) on a universal right to punish a tyrant who denies democracy and civil and religious liberty to his people.

So why does the National Curriculum ignore the English Civil War? One can speculate.

The English Civil War is not just any political event in the history of one, randomly chosen country. It is a pivotal event in a story the National Curriculum doesn't tell.

The English Civil War is a vital part of the history of Western Civilisation.

It places Britain - at that time a small, poor island nation far from the geographic centre of Europe - at the absolute centre of the battle for liberty.

It emphasises how the struggle between tyrannical government and free society has defined human history.

Indeed, it emphasises how resistance to excessive taxation is the common thread in so many disparate revolts against state power throughout history.

The National Curriculum has been determined according to three very specific "cross-curriculum priorities":

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures
- Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia
- Sustainability.

These priorities are woven through all the subjects of the National Curriculum - not just History, but also English, Mathematics, and Science.

None of those priorities provides an opportunity to explore the strengths and development of Western Civilisation. A story of how Australia's political system developed that includes the English Civil War directly contradicts the philosophical and ideological assumptions of those three priorities.

'Sustainability' demonstrates human society not as progressing towards greater wealth, prosperity, and improvement in the human condition, but as a problem. Both Asian and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are valuable and important subjects, but their impact on Australia's liberal democratic framework has been minor compared to the struggle for liberalism in Britain.

The study of 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' reveals a tendency that's been noted by British historian Niall Ferguson. He's talked about how throughout the English-speaking world it has now become assumed "that it is other cultures we should study, not our own."

What discussion there is of liberty and liberalism in the National Curriculum is all centred around developments of the twentieth century.

But these more recent struggles for liberty will make little sense to students who know nothing of the concept or history of liberty. Minorities who protested they lacked the same freedom of the majority were well aware of the history of those freedoms. They knew that equality mattered because it had not been extended to them.

As the editor of *The National Curriculum: A Critique*, Chris Berg, has written:

[O]ppressed minorities were seeking the same rights held by the majority. Aboriginal Australians wanted full political rights. Black Americans wanted an end to discriminatory Jim Crow laws. To teach the struggle for minority rights without mentioning how the idea of universally applicable rights came into being is to distort history.

We could dismiss this distortion as an accident if not for the strong impression it would give students - that the history of Western civilisation is primarily characterised by the oppression of minorities, not the long, slow, spluttering development and expansion of political freedom, liberalism and prosperity.

Rights denied to racial minorities is a stain on our past, but it is not the sole attribute of our history.

By telling only part of the story of liberty, the National Curriculum leaves the impression on students that the story of liberty is one of minorities gaining rights against the oppression of the majority. But in reality, throughout the course of human history it has been the state and tyrannical rulers who have oppressed minorities and majorities alike.

Of course, all politics is ideological, and no curriculum can avoid teaching material that could be construed as ideological content.

Associate Professor Tony Taylor's article in *Crikey* confirmed another conclusion of *The National Curriculum: A Critique*. Namely, that the National Curriculum is hostile to a central part of Western Civilisation, Christianity. In the book, David Daintree writes:

...like it or loathe it, Christianity has been the dominant faith and moral mentor for our nation since white settlement began ... It would be good to see our society honestly facing

up to the implications of its own heritage, and mature enough to recognise the good alongside the bad, and wise enough to see that amid the imperfections of any human organisation there is much to take pride in.

Associate Professor Taylor's comments about Christianity in the National Curriculum were simultaneously antagonistic and dismissive.

Christianity is covered in Year 8 under "the spread of Christianity", medieval Europe under the Crusades (not so good, that bit), the medieval dominance of the Catholic church and the Spanish conquest of the Americas (another not-so-good bit).

Taylor is basically arguing that the influence of Christianity of the modern world (or at least, all of the influence worth teaching the next generation of Australians) is confined to just three episodes.

Again, this attitude illustrates the failure of the National Curriculum to tell the story of Australia's democratic history. To describe the history of ideals such as freedom, equality, political representation and individualism would require the National Curriculum to engage with the fact that those ideals were developed within an explicitly Christian framework. But because the National Curriculum does not do so Christianity can be dismissed and pigeon-holed into limited and narrow historical episodes. As Taylor reveals, in two out of the three substantive contexts in which the National Curriculum examines Christianity, Christianity is interpreted in a negative light.

The National Curriculum allows Year 8 students to learn about "the policy of religious toleration" of the Ottoman Empire and how the Mongols under Genghis Khan provided an "exemption of teachers, lawyers and artists from taxes". But when for example students in Year 9 learn about the transatlantic slave trade under the heading of "Progressive ideas and movements from 1750 to 1918" there's no mention of the central role of Christian abolitionists in having the slave trade abolished.

If you're interested you can read more about what Associate Professor Tony Taylor said about the National Curriculum at

http://westerncivilisation.ipa.org.au/2011/02/tony-taylor-incrikey-on-the-national-curriculum/.

The National Curriculum - A Critique was produced as part of the Foundations of Western Civilisation, a joint program of the Institute of Public Affairs and the Mannkal Economic Education Foundation.

The Program has an Advisory Council whose members are Professor Geoffrey Blainey, Dr Anthony Cappello, Paul Forgasz, Professor Ian Harper, Professor Wolfgang Kasper, Professor Greg Melleuish, Julie Novak, and Professor Claudio Veliz.

If you would like to know more about the Foundations of Western Civilisation Program please do not hesitate to contact me.

Before the National Curriculum is implemented it should be subjected to more scrutiny than it has so far received.

In the long-term what's in the National Curriculum is no less important than the traffic lights outside our primary schools.

Yours sincerely,

John Roskam

Executive Director - Institute of Public Affairs

Enclosed: The National Curriculum - A Critique

Copy to: Members and Senators of the Commonwealth Parliament,

Members of the State and Territory Parliaments