

Current Affairs As History

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A new draft syllabus for VCE Australian History in Victoria has been modified after protests from teachers. But why was it proposed in the first place? And is the present syllabus acceptable?

THE recent ‘history wars’ imbroglio revealed that progressives control the public bodies which set the agenda in history studies, a control confirmed by a new draft syllabus for VCE Australian History in Victoria. Instead of being chastened by the recent debate, they have come up with a draft syllabus even more extreme than in the past.

Why have the numbers doing history declined so much over the years? When my children studied Australian History in middle high school forms in the 1980s, the textbook set was *Changing Australians* by Sue Fabian. In this book, the author took fashionable causes (such as women, Aborigines and the environment), projected them back on to the past, and called the result ‘history’. Our children, though sympathetic to these three groups, found they learnt little from such a course, as everything was predictable and ideological—no facts inconvenient to the general tenor of the course were allowed to get in the way (‘[Aborigines], too, had fights and wars, but these seem to have been rare’). And when our children did other subjects such as literature, religion, politics and even geography, they found the syllabuses there too focused on the victim status of women, Aborigines and the environment. Having this pushed at them from all angles led to a mixture of boredom and resentment.

Over the years, the Form 12 VCE syllabus in Australian History has come to resemble the Sue

Fabian approach. It is now an ‘Imagining Australia’ course rather than a true history course. The 2003 course is divided up into the four half-century periods since European settlement, with the new holy trinity being women, Aborigines and multiculturalism.

In the section of the course from 1945 to the present, the student has to choose a topic that caused divisions and debate in society. This predetermines the issues, since Australia has been a coherent and stable society, whose mainstream interests are not reflected here, whereas minority interests such as multiculturalism get a prominent place in the sun. And look at the specific list of divisive issues nominated: ‘The Communist Party Dissolution Bill, Labor Party split, Whitlam dismissal, Gordon–Franklin blockade, the Mabo and Wik decisions and the Stolen Generations’. These are all icon issues of the Labor left. The Whitlam government loans scandal and the Hawke–Keating economic reforms are more important than the Gordon–Franklin blockade, but they can’t be mentioned as they run against left orthodoxy. The activities of the Liberal Party, which governed for 37 out of these 58 years, are elided.

The course is heavily weighted to political and ideological concerns at the expense of economic and social ones. In the section from 1850 to 1900, one might expect the prolonged land boom and great prosperity of that period, when wheat and wool were established as staple exports, would gain a

mention. Instead we get a negative or black armband interpretation: ‘colonial governments encouraged new agricultural settlements through selection programs, radically altering the natural environment through the exploitation of natural resources ... and European fauna introduced, which subsequently became feral’. This is an unbalanced statement—it wasn’t just a story of exploitation, it was also a great national success story on which our prosperity to today has been based.

The course suffers from the Sue Fabian fallacy of projecting today’s concerns on to the past in an ahistorical way. The 1901–1945 section of the courses directs the student to study how ‘feminism challenged traditional roles’ in that period. Feminism as a major strand in Australian life in the *first* half of the twentieth century?

The 1788–1850 section predictably begins with *terra nullius* and the claim that ‘this act of colonization denied the existence of people whose world view was different to that of the European settlers’. This is untrue, as early instructions on the way Aborigines were to be treated show. The eighteenth-century concept of *terra nullius* does not mean the land was unoccupied, but that fixed abode, growing crops and some form of socio-political organization were required to establish legal occupation under English property law at the time. Students, who are supposed to learn from history the way things were done in the past, which may differ from our ways, are here

being denied that opportunity. This approach incites the student to premature judgement and moral indignation, before the facts are established.

The new draft syllabus for 2004 is even more startling. It has omitted both the 1860–1888 period of great prosperity and expansion and the 1950–1965 Menzies period altogether. Leaving these out gives a distorted slant to Australia's history. The gap in chronology means that no topic can be pursued in a continuous way. Three-quarters of the course is now focused on the second, more recent century of European settlement—surely an imbalance. This is moving history towards current affairs. One whole section covers 1965–2000, with the 1990s singled out for detailed consideration. Tampa (2001) and the Iraq war (2003) are included. How can these live issues get priority over 1860–1888 in a history course? To consider the whole vexed immigration question from 1788 is exactly the sort of thing a history course should do, to give the student the context of recent events, but it's exactly the sort of thing that this course, with its lack of a coherent narrative structure and chronology, cannot do. The 1914–1950 section is based on threats to Australia which, like divisiveness, underemphasizes the consensus nature of social life. The Paul Kelly thesis in *The End of Certainty* on the Deakinite Settlement of White Australia, Industry Protection, Wage Administration, State Paternalism and Imperial Benevolence would have provided a more fruitful framework.

In an earlier draft, rejected after protests, the Menzies Government was denigrated and the Whitlam Government fulsomely praised. But the underlying ideology remains: Aborigines, the environment, feminism, multiculturalism are the wave of the future. And of course in the 1990s, as we all know, the backlash forces

of reaction are stamping down on Aborigines, women and immigrants, the new holy trinity. This 'true believers' nostalgia resurrects the discredited view that the Labor forces are those of initiative in Australian politics, and conservative forces those of reaction; it also encapsulates Manning Clark's equally discredited view that recent Australian history can be seen as a struggle between the life affirmers and the life deniers. The syllabus is bad enough, but it gives a green light to teachers in the classroom to take its interpretations to even more extreme lengths.

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A narrow range of issues is dictated to the student, who cannot approach the subject with an open mind. The VCE examinations are public exams, and shouldn't be the preserve of any one group. Our society is structured so that secondary and tertiary education is the pathway most must complete to succeed and go further in life, and the nation cannot afford this pathway to be contaminated in such a way.

Those who have caused the decline in history are now getting themselves appointed to running government inquiries into the problem—the arsonists are dress-

ing themselves up as the fire-brigade. Associate Professor Tony Taylor, who heads the National Centre for History Education, has just received a \$115,000 federal grant to look into history's problems. He believes that the immediacy of modern technology is making more people, including students, interested in history: 'What they are able to do now because of satellite feeds, they're able to watch history unfold in front of them ... And people want to know why it's happening'. He believes that teachers often err by not focusing on history that is unfolding: 'All of this is happening and then you go into school and someone comes in and starts boring you to tears about something really stupid that you are not really interested in'. The latter presumably is the past. Professor Taylor is guilty of 'presentism'. When the leaders of the history profession can't distinguish between history and current affairs, we are in a bad way. Those running the Australian history course have presided over a calamitous decline in numbers over the decades, so surely their credibility should be questioned. They appear to be out of touch. Might they not now be retired as failures and a new group of people brought in to resurrect the show?

There have been, thankfully, so many protests by teachers that some of the most objectionable parts of the new draft syllabus have been modified. But why would an expert history syllabus committee, which administers a public system with which all students must comply, have tried this on in the first place?

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