

THE POLITICS OF HISTORY TEACHING

INTRODUCTION

Several stimulating articles by the former HMI John Slater have highlighted the **political** as well as educational dimensions of recent curriculum development and debate in school history in the UK (Slater 1989; 1991). Slater has clearly demonstrated that the debate over National Curriculum History in the years leading up to and beyond the Education Reform Act (1988) was as much about the "politics of history teaching" as it was about the "pedagogy of history teaching."

The debate was political in a number of ways. The decision to introduce a National Curriculum was itself a political decision of central government. Politicians as well as historians, history educators and history teachers -- and, of course, the media -- were all contributors to a very public debate over the nature, purpose and content of school history (see Gardiner 1990). Furthermore, various pressure groups were at work, trying to influence public opinion and especially the views of the political decision-makers on such issues as the necessity for British history and whether there was a place for skills development in the history classroom. (For a representative critique, see Husbands and Pendry 1992).

Slater shows how the History Working Group, given the task of drafting proposals for National Curriculum History, drew on the extensive experience of its members, consulted widely with interested parties, and did its best to come up with a realistic and defensible set of proposals for school history 5--16 (Slater 1991). What is clear from his account is that a number of the significant changes that were made to the Working Group's deliberations were the direct result of Ministerial decisions made by successive Secretaries of State. As Slater rightly emphasises, some of these changes were most sensible, but others appear to have flown in the face of considerable expert professional advice to the contrary. No doubt the history curriculum will continue to be subject to various political pressures as implementation and assessment gather momentum.

Developments in New South Wales

It is interesting to consider the development of the New South Wales Years 7--10 History syllabus of August 1992 in the light of Slater's analysis of the "politics of history teaching" in the UK. The curriculum development process in NSW which led to the 1992 History syllabus has many parallels with the emergence of National Curriculum History in England. This is true both in relation to the general climate for "educational reform" and the specific debate on the nature and purpose of school history, especially the requirement that national history be studied by all pupils.

In the UK and in NSW the government of the day passed an Education Reform Act (England and Wales 1988; NSW 1990) which was to introduce sweeping, but similar, educational change in the respective school systems. The reform package involved the implementation of corporate models of school and bureaucratic management, centralised development and control of outcomes driven curriculum, increasing central regulation of assessment procedures and credentialling and the forging of a direct link between

educational goals and current economic imperatives. (For the UK scene see Whitty 1989; for NSW see Braithwaite 1992).

Direct government involvement in determining curriculum in NSW was signalled by the release in November 1989 of the curriculum white paper *Excellence and Equity*, prepared for the Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Dr Terry Metherell (Metherell 1989). Among the many changes was the decision to make 100 hours of Australian history (and 100 hours of Australian geography) mandatory for all students in the years 7 to 10.

Concerns over the Place of History

Initially, this decision led to uncertainty and confusion in the teaching community. The mandatory hours might be fulfilled either through the existing disciplines of History and Geography or via the integration of both into an Australian Studies course. While the move to mandate the study of Australian history (and geography) endorsed their value by locating both within the core of students' learning, it was clear that an integrated studies course would pose a threat to each of the disciplines. A second area of uncertainty was where the Australian content was to be taught -- in the years 7/8 or years 9/10?

In an important paper, Carmel Young describes how these difficulties were resolved and how the 1992 History syllabus came into being (Young 1992).² It was a complex and demanding process in which the syllabus committee had to take into account

differing philosophical orientations to History held by academics, teachers, community groups, journalists and those directly involved in syllabus development; varying views on how students develop historical understandings; the range of opinions on the present and future social needs of students and divergent views on the purpose of historical studies in the school curriculum. (Young 1992: 37-38)

Various drafts were developed and circulated to the history teaching community for comment. The media bought into the discussion. On 9 August 1991 *The Australian* published Padric McGuinness's condemnation of the syllabus committee and its "ideological product." A most interesting reaction came from the Head of the Department of History at the University of Sydney, Professor Deryck Schreuder:

There is to be a new Australian history syllabus for years 7--10, which requires study of our national past and which I strongly welcome. But when I read that draft syllabus, my heart somewhat sinks: presentist in its issues, 20th century yet again in its focus, lacking the comparative imperial-colonial perspective, and taking a difficult thematic approach -- in a situation which cries out for a holistic, narrative understanding of our complex social evolution....The schools' syllabus was once, in days gone by a project of interaction between the historical profession and the Department of Education. But the current relationshipis without major influence on the way the discipline of history is being presented and taught in our schools. (Schreuder 1991)³

Debate on the August 1991 Draft

The syllabus committee presented a reworked draft to the Curriculum Committee of the NSW Board of Studies in August 1991. It was rejected as being too sociological in approach with too much of an emphasis on conflict in Australian history. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported the Board's rejection but allowed the Chairperson of the History Syllabus Committee to defend the document and its intent.

Students should be aware of both the positive and negative aspects of Australian history and we shouldn't shy away from conflict....It's an issues based syllabus. The big issues were certainly canvassed -- racism, immigration, multiculturalism, gender concerns, technology -- and these were to be studied within the context of change in the last 200 years....I believe that the syllabus has raised some important issues....and has picked up on much of the current historical writing of professional historians. It's topical and challenging to students. (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 17 September 1991)

The Board of Studies organised a series of Roundtable discussions in October 1991 in an attempt to reach some form of consensus over design, approach and content. Position papers were presented by academics, teachers, teacher educators, syllabus committee members and History Teachers' Association representatives. To some extent the Round tables did lay to rest the claims of ideological bias. There was considerable support for the syllabus committee's selection of issues/ topic areas and approach to historical learning. The Round tables generally endorsed the relevance of the August draft in the treatment of current issues, in the writing of history and its inclusiveness and in incorporating a diversity of historical voices formerly marginalised into the secondary history curriculum.

It is appropriate at this point to draw attention to the key features of the August 1991 draft. Carmel Young identifies three features which the syllabus committee regarded as innovative, but were viewed as controversial in some quarters.

(1) It adopted an enquiry based approach and involved the study of contemporary issues, events and people to ensure relevance. This would enable students to commence their investigation of the past through their own and 'known' social, political and economic environment. Students were to be encouraged to consider a range of interpretations of past and present issues and events. They were also expected to develop the skills of critical thinking through engagement with a wide variety of sources.

(2) It encouraged students to engage with the historic environment through the mandating of a site study. They were also expected to consider heritage/ history related issues -- Who owns the past? How is the past presented? Why is it presented this way and who are the presenters?

(3) It mandated heritage studies, Aboriginal history and the integration of gender and multicultural perspectives into all strands. This broke new ground and was aimed at reflecting, within the syllabus, revisions and reorientations in the writing and presentation of Australian history which had taken place in recent years. (Young 1992: 40-41)

As a result of the Round table discussions the syllabus committee undertook to prepare another draft, retaining many of the essential features of the August draft, but with

simplification of design and rationalisation of content. The inquiry based approach, together with site and heritage studies, remained central. In February 1992 the Board agreed to the revised draft being circulated to schools and other interested parties for comment. Further minor changes were incorporated and the final version of the History Syllabus Years 7--10 was published in August 1992.

Reflections on Curriculum Change in History

Reflecting on the process of recent curriculum change in history in NSW, it is clear that the force exercised by various pressure groups and individuals, including academic historians, was considerable and at times destabilising for the history syllabus committee. As Young herself emphasises, the process highlighted a series of pertinent and recurring questions relating to curriculum control and ownership: who makes the major decisions related to the processes and products of syllabus change in NSW—the Board, the syllabus committee, academics or teachers? Should greater weight be given to the views of particular interest groups and individuals? Why? What criteria are relevant here?

In designing a history syllabus for 12 to 16 year olds Young insists that the primary concern should be to ensure relevance. What is needed is “a syllabus which attempts to reflect social realities, accommodate student learning needs and is in line with current epistemological and methodological concerns of the discipline.” (Young 1992: 44). In developing a syllabus that is in line with the “current epistemological and methodological concerns of the discipline” of history, Young draws on the work of Keith Jenkins, particularly his *Rethinking History* (Jenkins 1991).

In concluding her account of curriculum change in history in NSW Young contrasts two quite different perceptions of the nature and role of history :

Is History to be conveyed as a predominantly academic quasi-dispassionate pursuit, distanced from contemporary concerns or as the source of lessons for the critical examination of prevailing societal issues? The orientation of some critics to the first of these positions may explain the charges of bias, sociological intent and the use of ideologically loaded terminologies levelled at the August draft.

What is absent from such claims is the public recognition that History is problematical -- “a contested term/disclosure, meaning different things to different groups.” (p.18) It is by nature an ideological construct reordered and revised “by those who are variously affected by power relationships.”(p.17) “It is far more than a slot in the school/academic curriculum, though we can see how what goes into such a space is crucially important for these variously interested parties.” (p.19) As a consequence conflict is predictable as vested interests jockey for dominance or at the very least inclusion in the decision making processes involved with curriculum change. (Young 1992: 44 - the references are to Jenkins 1991)

It is clear from this case study of history curriculum development in NSW that the phrase chosen by John Slater to describe processes at work in the UK context -- “the politics of history teaching” -- is entirely appropriate to describe the recent situation in NSW.

NOTES

1. The considerable pedagogical impact of some of these political decisions is highlighted in Watts and Grosvenor (1995) Introduction and chapter 1
2. It is important to recognise that Young herself was a political player in the events she describes. She was Chairperson of the History Syllabus Committee itself in the period under discussion. Further, she was the then President of the History Teachers' Association of New South Wales. Nor should her position as a history teacher educator (at the University of Sydney) be overlooked.
3. Two comments on Schreuder's nostalgia are in order: (i) In the "good old days" the Sydney University Professor of History wrote the Leaving Certificate History Syllabus, set the exam paper and marked all the papers. (see Barcan 1977); (ii) One third of current History syllabus committee members are university academics; they include a representative from the University of Sydney History Department.

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