HISTORY IN POLITICS

Neoconservative progressivism, knowledgeable ignorance and the origins of the next history war

Tony Taylor

This article outlines the relationship between neoconservative politics in Australia and history education. It categorises the neoconservative view of this relationship as first, one founded on an updated version of Whig progressivism and second, one founded on 'knowledgeable ignorance', arguing that a future Coalition government will almost certainly base its proposed reforms of history education on these misconceived approaches.

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Of all school subjects, it is history that attracts the most intense level of political interference in democracies and dictatorships alike. In democracies it tends to be the conservative side of politics, with its preference for the canonical approach, cultural transmission, commemoration and national celebration, that shows the greatest sense of commitment to intervention in history education, with the leftist parties frequently noticeable by their absence.¹ Indeed, the British historian of

¹ See, for example, Tony Taylor and Robert Guyver (eds) *History Wars in the Classroom: Global Perspectives*, Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing 2012. See also US cultural psychologist Jonathan Haidt's psychosocial view (*The Righteous Mind*,

modern Germany, Richard Evans, in commenting on the recent (2011–2013) brouhaha about the latest (conservative) version of the English history curriculum, pointed out that '[t]he Labour Party has remained silent',² an observation that would apply equally to Australia during almost a decade of turmoil and change in history education under the Howard administration.³ Moreover, British and Australian history educators, whose expertise lies in pedagogy rather than polemics, have largely remained mute about these kinds of interventions, leaving much of the running to their colleagues, the academic historians. That is why this article is in *History Australia*, because we are about to enter another period of politicised meddling in school history, and it will almost certainly fall to academic historians to uphold the integrity and the authenticity of their discipline as practised in Australia's schools.

In late February 2013, Christopher Pyne, the Shadow Minister for Education, Apprenticeship and Training, began gearing up for the forthcoming general election with a criticism of 'child-centred learning' in state schools, which he would like to see replaced by 'didactic teaching methods'.⁴ He then drew a very broad-brush picture of the way child-centred teaching has apparently 'dominated the system for the past 20, 30 or 40 years'. His historical uncertainty about the timing of this phenomenon caught my eye since it reminded me of a similar Pyne sortie into the world of history in 2011. At an event run by the neoconservative think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), Pyne promised that if he were elected to office, he would take immediate corrective action regarding the recently announced national history curriculum:⁵

London: Allen Lane 2012) that the conservative mindset primarily emphasises respect for authority, loyalty to a group or tribe and the purity of facts; elaborated on and discussed in the context of history education in Sue Collins and Tony Taylor, 'Can we tell who we are without a war? Australian school history and the media?', A paper delivered at the American Education Research Association Annual Conference, San Francisco, 28 April 2013.

² Richard J Evans, 'The wonderfulness of us (the Tory interpretation of history)', *The London Review of Books* 33 (6), 17 March 2011, 9–12.

³ But note Paul Keating's notorious and acerbic irruptions into historiographical debates in 1992 and 2002 over, in particular, the 1942 fall of Singapore, the alleged British abandonment of Australian forces and consequent changes to ideas of Australian national identity.

⁴ Daniel Hurst, 'Old school is way to go, says Pyne', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 February 2013.

⁵ Christopher Pyne, 'Teaching history with no regard for civilisation', 2 February 2011. Available from: <http://www.pyneonline.com.au/media/media-releases/teaching-history-with-no-regard-for-civilisation>. See also 'Christopher Pyne flags review of history curriculum', *Australian*, 22 April 2013.

Unfortunately, the proposed history discipline is found wanting. It is not something that I would be prepared to accept as Education Minister. If elected at the next federal election, it would be my intention to initiate a review of at least the history discipline in the national curriculum to ensure that it achieves the all important goal of filling young minds with the knowledge of why Australia is like it is today.

Leaving aside his antique view that history education was about ‘filling young minds’, the significance of this January 2011 speech lay in its context. It was given at a launch of a slim IPA volume entitled *The National Curriculum: A Critique*. Pyne, while not ostensibly a close associate of the IPA, has written for them and does share something of their neoconservative worldview. And it was in this speech that Pyne referred to two themes that are IPA motifs when it comes to history education. They are the significance for Australian students of events in English history, especially the seventeenth-century Civil War, and the importance of the ‘Judeo-Christian tradition’.

Over and above these references, there were three features of his speech that alarmed me then, and still alarm me now. The first of these was a Coalition politician’s pledge to interfere directly in the school-level version of a politically sensitive academic discipline. We had seen this kind of personal intervention in the Howard years and here it was again.⁶

The second was Pyne’s probably unwitting adoption of a Whig progressive view of history, an approach that flourished in the nineteenth century but has since the 1930s gradually faded away after it was outed by the Cambridge historian, Herbert Butterfield. In his brief (132 pages) but influential booklet on the subject, Butterfield argued that historicist Whig progressivism straitjacketed our understanding of the past by trying to see past events, mainly constitutional changes, as benign precursors of an inevitable and glorious present.⁷ Despite, or possibly even because of, its vintage character, this approach has now been revived in Australia as *neoconservative progressivism* with the same teleological approach to *laissez-faire* liberal ideology, the same assertions regarding a glorious, exceptionalist and unproblematic parliamentary progress, and the same focus on the unalloyed triumphs of Western civilisation – all captured within an ideological straitjacket. In addition, neoconservative progressivism has evangelical foreign policy features as

⁶ See, for example, Tony Taylor, ‘Under siege from Right and Left: a tale of the Australian history wars’, in Taylor and Guyver (eds) *History Wars*, 25–50.

⁷ Herbert Butterfield *The Whig Interpretation of History*, London: Bell 1931.

well as a consciously firm Christian underpinning. What is also new about neoconservative progressivism, compared with its Whig predecessor, is its focus on history education as an agent in the formation of a particular form of national identity.

Third, there was Pyne's highlighted mention of the centrality of the English Civil War in Australian history. This idea came out of the blue since it had never been stressed during the Howard years as a 'must do' historical topic. The idea of inserting this seventeenth-century conflict into a Pyne-friendly national curriculum was therefore quite a novelty. It soon became clear, however, that it was straight out of the IPA playbook – based on a 9 January 2011 IPA-authored opinion editorial in the *Sunday Age*, 'National curriculum gets our history badly wrong'. In this piece, among other assertions, the author Chris Berg referred to the English Civil War as part of Australia's 'rich inheritance of liberalism and civil liberties'.

A civil war

In response to Pyne's IPA speech, I wrote a critical and provocative rejoinder for Crikey.com that suggested, as I have done many times in the past, that politicians should stop meddling with history curriculum. More pointedly, I deliberately dropped in a sentence about the English Civil War that contained the comment that 'the latter is arguably just a series of confused and confusing localised squabbles'.⁸ I had written the sentence in that precise way because I was exasperated by these IPA and Pyne advances into territory that was clearly quite beyond their ken, and I felt it was important to flush out their unfamiliarity with real history.⁹ I knew, for example, that the historiography of the English Civil War was both complex and bewildering. I also knew that there were prominent and persuasive arguments by historians such as Ronald Hutton, neatly summarised for any interested reader by Ann Hughes in her book *The Causes of the English Civil War*,¹⁰ that the mid seventeenth-century English version of a civil war was not a simple binary conflict between royalists

⁸ Tony Taylor, 'Memo to Pyne: You're reading the wrong history curriculum', Crikey.com, 31 January 2011, Available from: http://www.crikey.com.au/2011/01/31/memo-to-pyne-youre-reading-the-wrong-history-curriculum/?wmp_switcher=mobile.

⁹ For a recent Pyne foray into, for him, the unmapped territory of contestability, see his April 2013 ABC Adelaide interview about Gallipoli in which he encountered David Bevan, an interviewer who actually knew his history. Available from: <http://www.pyneonline.com.au/media/transcripts/abc-891-48>.

¹⁰ Ann Hughes *The Causes of the English Civil War*, 1998 edition, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

and parliamentarians, between ‘tyranny’ and ‘liberty’, but was also a series of small-scale conflicts fought between localised combatants across three kingdoms. These engagements ranged from Cork to Inverness, over a period of time, 1637–53, that extended outside the war’s customarily understood temporal boundaries of 1642–48. Moreover, I knew that these wars were fought in and around a wide range of local and national issues. There was, however, no evidence that the IPA or Christopher Pyne were acquainted with these important points. I was also aware that these events of 1640s marked a turning point in inter-denominational relations in the three kingdoms, as well as in monarchical/parliamentary constitutional relations. At the same time, I knew that there were no substantive and well-founded arguments to suggest the progress of these constitutional developments formed a linear procession from the 1215 Magna Carta through to the English Civil War – and on to the 1900 *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act*.

My provocative and arguable reference to ‘localised squabbles’ was therefore a test. I watched as an IPA campaign against my article became wonderfully florid in its intensity. The culmination of this offensive, and the conclusion of my test, came in March 2011 when John Roskam, director of the IPA and a former Kennett-era adviser, circulated an open letter to schools minister Peter Garrett which was copied to all Commonwealth, State and Territory parliamentarians.¹¹ In his letter, Roskam attributed far too much weight to my curricular influence and far, far too much partiality regarding my political disposition. He went on to argue:

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.

Using a string of quotes to support his point Roskam then suggested that the English Civil War was absolutely essential to the study of Australian history because Winston Churchill, conservative author Paul Johnson, Marxist historian Christopher Hill, Sydney University’s John Keane and lawyer Geoffrey Robertson all thought, unsurprisingly,

¹¹ John Roskam, ‘Why is the legacy of western civilisation missing from Australia’s national curriculum?’, 18 March 2011. Available from: www.ipa.org.au/library/.../1300851496_document_garrett_letter.pdf

that the war was important: Roskam forgot to mention, important in a British way.

None of these authorities, alive or dead, actually argued for the Civil War's compulsory inclusion in the Australian national curriculum. Further, amongst Roskam's epistolary assertions, there was no mention of the actual character of the English Civil War, no discussion of the arguments and debates about its origins, its course and its impact, nor any detailed justification for its mandatory appearance in Australian schools. There was no allusion to the activities and impact of two significant mid seventeenth-century radical groups, the Levellers and the Ranters, and no reference at all to the ethnic cleansing controversies surrounding the Cromwellian 1649–1653 Irish campaign. Instead, there was a summary statement that Australian school students must study the English Civil War because Roskam believed that 'it is a vital part of the history of Western Civilisation'.

There are very, very many parts of the history of Western civilisation, some more vital than others, each of them with their advocates for significance and prominence, and each vying for a spot in a very tightly constructed Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA) world history curriculum where an evaluative study of western civilisation does indeed play a major part. However, in the scheme of things, the English Civil War, as conceived by neoconservative opinion, will struggle to justify its position as a central feature in a rationally and professionally designed national curriculum program that covers world history from 60 000 BC to the near present, and is founded on skills-based investigation rather than on mere celebration.¹²

Dismayed but unsurprised at the IPA Director's stance and his unfamiliarity with history, I filed the incident away until now, the year of a general election.

Judeo-Christian tradition

Another neoconservative mantra is the 'Judeo-Christian tradition'. As a concept a 'Judeo-Christian tradition' might sound like a good thing to have, but it actually presents an unhelpful and discomfiting myth about Jewish-Christian relations that is controversial in both political and theological respects. Indeed, this apparently benign but largely unexplored concept has a political history all of its own.

¹² For more details on how ACARA frames historical investigation in schools, see <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/History/Curriculum/F-10>.

The term was originally used by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century biblical scholars to describe the scope of Old and New Testament studies.¹³ The concept was then reframed in broader terms by Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940s as a sign of United States solidarity with persecuted Jews of Nazi Europe and after 1945, it was used by presidents Truman and Eisenhower as part of their Cold War rhetoric as well as by Christian apologists anxious to convince surviving Jewish communities that the Holocaust was a ghastly aberration.¹⁴ Apart from a few brief references, including a 1960 mention by Yehudi Menuhin in discussing the arts and music,¹⁵ the phrase then largely fell into disuse until the 1980s when it was revived by Ronald Reagan, amongst others, as Moral Majority, Christian rhetoric against the (Godless and anti-Semitic) Soviets. After a lapse in the 1990s ‘the Judeo-Christian tradition’ was given the kiss of life by the US Religious Right as well as by a very small number of conservative, US anti-secularist Jews (and Christian converts from Judaism) who align themselves with the Religious Right. Borrowed willy-nilly from these American sources, the phrase has now become constant theme in Australian neoconservative rhetoric and, adapting historian Andrew Preston’s expression, it is used as an assertion of Christian difference in a multicultural western world that is increasingly Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu.¹⁶

In Australia, John Howard used the phrase in his assimilationist post-Cronulla, Australia Day eve speech in 2006.¹⁷ It later appeared in an IPA prospectus for its ‘Foundations of Western Civilisation Program’ (2010), and then in Alan Anderson’s *IPA Review* article ‘Rendering unto God: “Revolutionary secularism” and the campaign to kick religion out of public life. How governments are trying to regulate away religious belief’.¹⁸

¹³ See, for example, Josef Rudwin, ‘Origin of Judeo-Christian worship’, *Open Court*, 33, May 1919, 287–295.

¹⁴ The Cambridge historian Andrew Preston has contextualised the religious/diplomacy connection from Roosevelt through to Reagan in *Sword and the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy*, New York: Alfred A Knopf 2012. See especially Part VI ‘Franklin Roosevelt and the Third Crusade’, 291–410; chapter 28, ‘A Judeo-Christian Foreign Policy’, 559–573; and chapter 29, ‘Ronald the Lionheart’, 574–600.

¹⁵ Yehudi Menuhin, ‘Commonwealth in Arts’, Letter to the Editor, *The Times*, 2 July 1960. His exact phrase was ‘Judeo-Christian thought’.

¹⁶ Andrew Preston’s comments in his *Boston Globe* article ‘A very young Judeo-Christian tradition: Our country’s religious identity is a surprisingly new – and it hasn’t always meant what it does now’, 1 July 2012. Buddhism is Australia’s fastest growing religion.

¹⁷ The full text is available on the Age website at: <http://australianpolitics.com/2006/01/25/john-howard-australia-day-address.html>.

¹⁸ *IPA Review*, March 2012. Available from: ipa.org.au/.../publication/1268711107_document_renderinguntogod.pdf.

The observation that Australia's political and cultural heritage is founded on Judeo-Christian values is always sure to make an audience of Australian academics or public servants shift uncomfortably in their seats. It is puzzling that such a *manifest historical truth* [my italics] could elicit an emotional response, particularly when 64 per cent of Australians identify themselves as Christian, according to the 2006 census.

This Judeo-Christian theme was taken up yet again by former prime minister Howard in his September 2012 Sir Paul Hasluck lecture, where he followed the IPA line in criticising the national curriculum for failing to give due prominence to the 'Australian achievement' and its place in the development of western civilisation:¹⁹

The curriculum does not properly reflect the undoubted fact that Australia is part of western civilisation; in the process it further marginalises the historic influence of the Judaeo [sic] Christian ethic in shaping Australian society and virtually purges British history from any meaningful role.

As for the religious aspects of the use of such a contentious term, they are based first on what is called the supersessionist or replacement view of Judaism and Christianity. Here, Christianity is regarded as a religion that has superseded its (outmoded and irrelevant) precursor, and consequently, a redundant Judaism is to be regarded, in condescending fashion, as a religious anachronism. In commenting on the supersessionist issue, the distinguished and outspoken Israeli scholar Yeshayahu Leibowitz remarked that Christianity 'is nothing but the denial of the right of Judaism to exist'.²⁰

Second, the phrase 'Judeo-Christian tradition' assumes shared theological values. But how can this be? Among other things, Judaism is a firmly monotheistic religion while some Christians argue that their own religion, with its 'mystery' of the Trinity, has, as US Notre Dame

¹⁹ John Howard, 'The Sir Paul Hasluck Foundation Inaugural Lecture', Winthrop Hall, The University of Western Australia, 27 September 2012. Available from: <http://www.news.uwa.edu.au/201209195017/events/former-prime-minister-john-howard-inaugural-hasluck-lecture>.

²⁰ Yeshayahu Leibowitz *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1992, 253. The phrase appears in a chapter where Leibowitz is discussing what he calls 'Hochhut's Error' [sic], the belief, as expressed in Rolf Hochhuth's 1963 play *The Deputy* that Pope Pius XII's inaction in the face of Nazism was a betrayal of 'true' Christianity. Leibowitz's scathing view is that it was actually 'true' Christianity that was complicit in the attempted annihilation of Jews during the Holocaust. See also John Connelly *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933-1965*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 2012.

University's philosopher Michael Rea and others suggest²¹ a polytheistic quality. Judaism also assumes that a good life is to be lived from the outset rather than, as is the case in some Christian denominations, attained by overcoming the stain of original sin and by benefiting from serial, formalised acts of forgiveness.

Third, as argued by the major US Jewish theologian Arthur A Cohen in *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (1969) and the controversial US Rabbi and author Jacob Neusner in *Jews and Christians: The Myth of a Common Tradition* (2001), the idea of historic Judeo-Christian harmony ignores a 2000-year history of theological antipathy and a millennium-long narrative of violent persecution of Jews in the name of Christianity.²² So even allowing for those interfaith initiatives drawing Christian and Jewish communities together today, the term 'Judeo-Christian tradition' and its variants remain very problematic, with Cohen commenting: 'I regard all attempts to define a Judeo-Christian Tradition as essentially barren and meaningless ... at the end point of the consensus when the good will is exhausted, and the rhetoric has billowed away, there remains an incontestable opposition'.²³ Not that the neoconservative advocates of the 'Judeo-Christian tradition' seem to be aware of these very sensitive issues, and it was this cluelessness, along with unfamiliarity with what constitutes authentic historical study, that drew me to the notion of the link between neoconservative progressivism and knowledgeable ignorance.

'Knowledgeable ignorance'

When it comes to historical knowledge, experience gained over close to a decade of working with the conservative side of politics had taught me that there were at least two forms of Coalition interest in history. The first of these sets of belief, held by former education ministers David Kemp and Brendan Nelson, is based on a kind of classical liberal view that (good) factually-based historical narratives would drive out (bad and leftist) thematic thinking. The second group – John Howard, Christopher Pyne and the IPA, for example – have a more firmly ideologised neoconservative

²¹ Michael Rea, 'Polytheism and Christian belief', *Journal of Theological Studies* 57 (1), April 2006, 133–148.

²² Arthur A Cohen *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition and Other Dissenting Essays*, New York: Harper and Row 1969; Jacob Neusner *Jews and Christians : The Myth of a Common Tradition*, London: SCM Press 2001.

²³ Cohen *Myth*, 205.

approach that sees school history as an agent of nationalist cultural engineering. Of the former group, my involvement with Coalition leaders told me that the Kemps and the Nelsons of this world did have a genuine and well-informed view of history. Of the latter group, it seemed clear to me that its neoconservative adherents displayed what can best be described in historian Norman Daniel's term, used in his 1960 book *Islam and the West: the making of an image*, as 'knowledgeable ignorance'.²⁴

Daniel's use of the phrase related to mid twentieth-century western misunderstanding of Islamic history and culture but the thinking behind the phrase struck me as applicable to how Australian neoconservatives view their own society. Daniel originally defined the term as 'knowing a people, ideas, civilizations, religions or histories as something they are not, and could not possibly be and maintaining these ideas even when the means exist to know differently'.²⁵ In other words, the phrase applies to those who speak or write in an apparently knowledgeable fashion about ideas, concepts or events about which they are misconceived, thanks to their unwillingness or inability to research their point of view in any methodical way.

Neoconservatives are knowingly ignorant because they mistakenly claim to know Australia for what it is, a Judeo-Christian society, but their understanding of its people, ideas and histories is founded on a view of events that is ideologically misconstrued. Moreover, they call on history education as an agent of assimilation into a culture based on such tribal memories while revealing an almost complete ignorance of pedagogy. They have seemingly paid little attention to the forty years of globally-based research that now informs the best kind of teaching in the subject. They therefore fall back on a Rankean view of the supremacy of the fact,²⁶ and they consider celebratory forms of commemoration obligatory replacements for open-ended investigation and explanation. Further, they hold to these ideas even when the research shows they should know differently. In other words, the neoconservative approach

²⁴ Norman Daniel *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, Edinburgh: University Press, 1960. The phrase is also used by Stefan Halper in his book *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies in their recent post 9/11 book, *Why Do People Hate America?* Minneapolis: Consortium Book Sales 2002, point out that 'knowledgeable ignorance' is now a generally accepted anthropological term.

²⁵ Daniel *Islam and the West*, 12.

²⁶ Referred to in a leader article in the *Australian*, 10 September 2008, as 'the tyranny of the fact'. For a detailed discussion of the *Australian's* role in the politics of history education, see Tony Taylor and Sue Collins, 'The politics are personal: *The Australian* vs the Australian curriculum in history', *Curriculum Journal* 23 (4), December 2012, 531–552.

is based on an outmoded and a wilful misunderstanding of the past and how it is taught as history.

Neoconservatives, of course, are not alone in their knowledgeable ignorance. For fifteen years at least, from the early 1990s to 2006, progressive Left educators continued to extol the virtues of generic social education, known variously as Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) or 'social slops', against all the evidence that it was simply not working; a combination of knowledgeable ignorance and denial.²⁷ Knowledgeable ignorance, therefore, is not just the prerogative of the Right. Nonetheless, if we apply Daniel's notion to history education, we capture the essence of the Right's approach to what must be taught in schools. Neoconservatives view history education as a key element in the revival of an integrated form of Australian society where multicultural relativism has already eroded historically established values. The consequence of this breakdown in traditional social norms, they argue, is a potential for social division and political instability. History education can heal these divisions by showing students that Australia's Christian democratic present is founded on a sublime, common constitutional tradition that stretches back to the Magna Carta by way of the English Civil War. Accordingly, students must be compelled to know about such stellar events in English history because Australia was once a British colony and British imperial influence underpins all that is good about modern Australia.

Allowing that the British imperial (including Irish, Scottish and Welsh as well as English) influence on Australia's past is very important and very complex, the neoconservative view, an ideological show bag of events, is both ahistorical and crude and, as a result, simply very bad history. Why? Australia's past, which is dynamic, sometimes conservative, sometimes radical, and at all times fascinating, is better understood in the context of dynamic national and world forces and events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than via a superficial and simplistic view of distant (and problematic in themselves) English events of the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. Second, it is bad history because the neoconservative view of the significance of its favourite events is unabashedly ideologised and cloaked in nationalistic sentiments, the kind of activity that British Conservative prime minister Harold Macmillan once contemptuously referred to as forming a 'ghetto of sentimentality about our past'.²⁸ Third, good history teachers guide students towards

²⁷ See, for example, Tony Taylor, 'Under siege from Right and Left', 25–50.

²⁸ Quoted in John Campbell *The Iron Lady*, London: Vintage 2012, 462. It was originally a 1962 comment, when Macmillan was talking about British Conservative Party anti-

questions and investigations rather than attempting to fill heads; the latter a suggestion that demonstrates a clear ignorance of how our best teachers teach and how all our students learn. What this means is that the IPA, as the current champion of this knowledgeably ignorant approach, is unwittingly arguing itself into quite a different area of the curriculum. Its notable historical moments should, even on the IPA's own reasoning, be included not in a history curriculum at all but in Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) classes.

Indeed, if we take the IPA *idées fixes* about key events in English history, they fit very neatly into the current Australian government definition of CCE which

promotes students' participation in Australia's democracy by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, values and dispositions of active and informed citizenship. It entails knowledge and understanding of Australia's democratic heritage and traditions, its political and legal institutions and the shared values of freedom, tolerance, respect, responsibility and inclusion.²⁹

Roskam's letter to the ministers and parliamentarians is really a plea for the importance of civics and citizenship education which, according to the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's Shape Paper on CCE,³⁰ will indeed be included in the national curriculum as a separate subject with an emphasis on 'Australia's federal system of government, political and social heritage [and] democratic processes'. A progressivist view of the Magna Carta, the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 might usefully be diverted away from an already crowded history curriculum. Students can then apply their historical skills, acquired in history classes, to assessing the significance of these events.

Such a sensible solution seems highly unlikely. It is almost certain that an incoming Coalition government will apply a slide rule to the current history curriculum and, inspired by the IPA and confident in their knowledgeable ignorance, demand that the Magna Carta, the English Civil War, the Glorious Revolution and the Judeo-Christian tradition will be compulsorily inserted and highlighted in a revised and fact-obsessed history curriculum.³¹ This interventionist approach has

Europeans, and was used by Geoffrey Howe in his 1990 cabinet resignation speech. It is arguably still relevant today.

²⁹ Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations. Available from: <http://www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/>

³⁰ Available as a pdf on the ACARA website: www.acara.edu.au.

³¹ See Tony Abbott's premonitory (and possibly minatory) speech to the IPA on its 70th anniversary, 5 April 2013, in which he commented: 'Alas, there is a new version of

already occurred in Britain under neoconservative education minister Michael Gove, who has stirred up a hornet's nest with his personalised view of how a fact-packed and celebratory history must be taught. But even such a hardliner as Gove has not ventured to cross the line when it comes to basing students' interpretation of the past on the muddled and ahistorical political fable called 'the Judeo-Christian tradition'.³² In a country whose Muslim population is fast approaching three million, there are some lines that even a crusading Tory education minister will not cross.

Conclusion

In Britain for over two decades – indeed, since Margaret Thatcher and her education minister, Kenneth Baker, oversaw the introduction of the UK's first national curriculum – there has been a dispiriting Twenty Years War over history in schools. To forestall an Australian version, we need an informed dialogue about the nature both of history and history teaching. I have written this article to point out that the neoconservative approach to history education is misconceived and its political arguments are based on an erroneous and projectionist view that the Left have already seized the history curriculum. In their view, this process capture needs to be reversed, and their ideologically-based but historically ill-founded ideas are understood as weapons in a battle for control of the classroom. As for the Centre and the Left, so far there is a silence about this highly politicised position.

The time therefore has come to stop arguing about what topics are in and what are out on political grounds. That just exacerbates the problem. When it comes to designing a history curriculum, what we should be arguing for is a professional approach, as has happened with the ACARA design for all its minor imperfections, rather than political or personal Left versus Right war games. We should also be arguing for curriculum stability, resisting attempts to make history education a political football

the great Australian silence – this time about the Western canon, the literature, the poetry, the music, the history and above all the faith without which our culture and our civilisation are unimaginable'. Available from: <http://www.tonyabbott.com.au/News/tabid/94/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/9135/Address-to-Institute-of-Public-Affairs-70th-Anniversary-Dinner-Melbourne.aspx>.

³² For a summary of the Gove initiatives (at the time of writing) and his attacks on Marxism in the classroom see: http://historyworks.tv/news/2013/03/09/history_curriculum_debate_updates/. And: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/1-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html>.

that is kicked from goal to goal with no subtlety and no real understanding of the game. Finally, what we should also be arguing for is real historical understanding, instead of knowledgeable ignorance.

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About the author

Tony Taylor teaches and researches at Monash University. Since 1999 he has worked with successive federal governments as a history education consultant including a 2008–2012 stint on ACARA's History Advisory Group. His most recent books in the field are *History Wars and the Classroom: Global Perspectives* (co-edited with Robert Guyver) published in 2012 by IAP, North Carolina and *Place and Time: Explorations in Teaching Geography and History* (co-authored with Carmel Fahey, Jeana Kriewaldt and David Boon), and published in 2012 by Pearson, Frenchs Forest, NSW.

Correspondence to Tony Taylor: tony.taylor@monash.edu