

History, National Life and the New Curriculum

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I want to start out by stating the obvious – I am not a schoolteacher; I am a university teacher. I went to school myself, of course, but that ended nearly 40 years ago now, and that expertise is getting pretty mouldy. My children went to school some years ago; but here I ought perhaps to make a confession, which is that they both dropped history at 14 (one to take geography, the other RS; neither of them, I feel, is a worse person for their choices, but that's another story). I was a school governor for 5 years, but I didn't see much of the classroom. I work with the exam boards and I get lots of opportunities to talk to teachers, as I've been doing very happily the last few days, but I don't really have any clear idea of what happens in the classroom, what works in the classroom, how one has to teach 11 year olds and 15 year olds differently – or, to put it in the vivid language that I've learned teachers employ, how to retain the attention of a bottom-set Year 8 History class on a rainy Friday afternoon in February.

I dwell on this to begin with because, as you all know, there is an overpowering tendency for people with no expertise and not even very good information to sound off on the history curriculum as if they owned it, and I'm determined not to do that this morning. Of course it's a good idea if parents and students feel some ownership in the curriculum, but there's something about the history curriculum that makes people imagine that they have more stake in it, and more entitlement to speak out about it, because it seems to touch their sense of self more intimately than, say, the chemistry or design-technology curricula. (And

I'm not just talking about politicians – they're a special case – more about them later.) Yet with voice ought to come responsibility – if you want to speak out on the curriculum, you have a responsibility to equip yourself minimally with knowledge about how it works, and to make a reasonable argument that your plans for it are feasible and desirable. To do that you need at least a modicum of information about how the curriculum operates at present and how it might operate under your grand design. You can't just extrapolate from your own personal experience or from the titbits you pick up in the Daily Mail. That's where the professionals – you – come in. In a democratic society, you can't be the arbiters of the curriculum, but you must be a crucial source of information on what works and what doesn't.

The current vogue for involving university teachers in the school curriculum has some sense to it, but only so much sense. It is partly based on a nostalgia for the good old days when (allegedly) academics were deeply embedded in the devising and examining of A-Levels. That was true of a certain kind of academic, though by no means all of us. I remember fondly the likes of Eric Evans and Bill Speck, but they were never typical of academic historians generally. And it was only really feasible when A-Levels were taken by under 10% of the cohort as was true in the 1960s, as opposed to nearly 50% today. (Meanwhile, academics – like teachers – have been asked to do a lot more of other things.) The vogue for involving academics is partly based on the false assumption that a school-leaving exam is the same as a university-entrance exam. And it is partly based on a further false assumption that all universities want the same things.

It has been interesting to note the understandable ambivalence of the Russell Group of universities when faced with Michael Gove's proposal that they take charge of specifying subject content for A-Levels. On the one hand, they are eager for more power and

recognition; they want to be seen as leaders. On the other hand, they have differentiated themselves as the Russell Group of research-intensive universities for a reason – that is, to distinguish themselves from other kinds of university. So at first they said no, they couldn't possibly assess the appropriateness of A-Level content for entrance to other universities, all they could do was assess its appropriateness for Russell Group entrance; and then they decided, well, yes, they could, or maybe they could. They've now set up the A-Level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB), 'a separate and independent company limited by guarantee', which will represent the Russell Group universities but will consult with other universities. Good luck to them.

Anyway, I am not nostalgic for the good old days, which are not retrievable, nor do I think A-Level curricula should be determined by my perception of what students need to get into Cambridge. I do, however, think that there is considerable scope for academics and teachers to agree on very broad criteria for what makes a good historical education for students in their late 'teens. I have been immensely encouraged by the general consensus on these issues that has emerged at the regular meetings that the Royal Historical Society now holds with the Historical Association to discuss curricular issues, and to agree common approaches to the many government consultations that we've had to field in the last few years. All of us – teachers and academics – want a broad curriculum that grounds students in British history but also exposes them to the rich treasure-house of human experience that lies in the histories of the whole of the world. We want a curriculum that exposes students to the turbulent histories of the 20th century – the wars and revolutions and social and economic changes that created the world in which we live today – but that also exposes them to the more exotic and fragmentary and less accessible histories of very distant and alien worlds; because the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there, and history teaches us

not only (I would say not much) about ourselves, but also (I would say mainly) about the many different ways of being human that have been devised over several millennia in very different locales and under almost unimaginable circumstances. We want a curriculum that encourages both breadth and depth; and that inculcates and tests a variety of skills, including ‘critical reflection, problem solving and the ability to study independently’, which Ofqual’s consultation last year specified as key skills underserved in the current A-Level regime. (We are at a loss to see how taking more exams will foster or measure ‘critical reflection, problem solving and the ability to study independently’ – all of which surely require more independent study and coursework, not less. We have said so repeatedly to Ofqual and the DfE and we are in the midst of saying so too to the Russell Group’s ALCAB and the other new bowls of alphabet soup that ironically have sprung up after the so-called bonfire of the quangoes.)

On all of these matters pertaining to A-Levels, as I say, the RHS and the HA have been gratifyingly of one mind, and I think academics do have something to contribute to those debates about teaching on the interface between school and university. We also have resources to contribute – secondary sources, textbooks, editions of primary sources, new online databases, views about trends in historical methods and historiography – for teachers and students in the later years of schooling. But the further back in the school you go, the less we have to contribute and the more foreign to us are the challenges and opportunities – and those bottom-set Year 8 students really are living in a very different country from the Year 13 students taking History A-Level. Accordingly we in the RHS rightly defer increasingly to the views of the HA on matters relating to GCSE and even more so to KS3 and the truly unimaginable issues confronting primary teachers.

So I've taken 10 minutes to get around to telling you that I don't feel very well qualified to talk about the national curriculum – not at least in terms of what works in the classroom. What I do feel better qualified to talk about is history, and so that's what I'm going to focus on for the rest of my time today – the history of the national curriculum, as much as the national curriculum for history. I want to ask, as an historian of modern Britain, why do we have a national curriculum for history in the first place, what did we think it was for, and what have the recent debates about the history curriculum revealed about how that history is changing in the present and future.

I don't suppose I need to remind you that we didn't have a national curriculum in this country until 25 years ago. That made the UK highly unusual among unitary states in the developed world – and federal states like Germany, the US, Canada and Australia tended to have provincial curricula instead – whereas in the UK local authorities on the town and county level were left to set their own curricula and even within local authorities individual schools and teachers were given considerable autonomy to teach what they wished. The only significant exception to this rule – not a statutory exception, but a market-driven one – was for that small proportion of the 14-18 age cohort who took the so-called 'public examinations' that were offered by the entirely autonomous examination boards. Schools that wished to prepare students for these exams – School Certificate and Higher School Certificate, or O Level and A Level as they were renamed after 1945 – were obviously constrained by the curricula set by the exam boards, and became increasingly focused on these exams in the postwar decades. But even then they were only catering to a minority of the population. It seems shocking to us now, but as late as the 1960s entry to professions such as banking, law, and accountancy was achieved as much by apprenticeship as by examination; as late as 1968, accountancy was still widely viewed as an 'O Level profession', that is, to be entered at 16 at

the latest, for which A Levels were not only unnecessary but even an impediment. It was only relatively insecure professions such as local government officers and, I'm sorry to say, schoolteachers, who early on required higher-level school examinations and even university degrees for entry. That's the professions – as for the majority of the population, it was not again until the 1960s that a majority of school-leavers achieved a single qualification of any kind. In the absence of public examinations, and in the absence of a national curriculum, the schooling experienced by most children in the UK before the 1960s was highly various, often highly experimental, sometimes very good, but entirely dependent on where you happened to live, what your local authority and your headteacher thought, and even what your classroom teacher liked.

As one survey of the average State secondary school in the 1930s proudly put it: 'No absolute control is exercised over the history course, either over its length or its content, by local or central authority...The history syllabus is drawn up by the senior history master in consultation with the headmaster...the choice of text-books lies entirely in the hands of the senior history master...It is one of the virtues of our system that it is not rigid, and that any tendency to stereotype examinations, and therefore history teaching, calls forth protests. The position of the teacher in an English school is a happy one [sic]...he remains free to decide what he shall teach and how he shall teach it...In the opinion of English teachers, history cannot be put into a strait-jacket, and it should not be taught for particular ends, national or international. The freedom of the individual teacher is the surest safeguard of the integrity of the subject, and on its integrity depends its value as an educational medium.'

Why was this – why was there such a consensus that the integrity of the subject needed safeguarding, and the safeguard was the freedom of the individual teacher? When I

was at a meeting recently at the DfE to discuss the national curriculum, the civil servants present confidently launched into a preliminary statement of what a national curriculum was for. When I asked them why they thought we had done without a national curriculum until the late 1980s, they replied equally confidently, ‘Because the teachers refused to be told what to teach.’ I’m afraid I laughed. That was a very convenient answer that projected inappropriately onto the earlier 20th century a Thatcherite nightmare of bolshy teachers’ unions holding the public to ransom. But of course teachers as a body had hardly any voice in debates before the 1960s. I’m afraid also that I then launched into a history lesson. The principal reason that Britain lacked a history curriculum before the 1980s was its liberalism – its commitment to decentralization, its suspicion of an over-mighty state, its insistence on the primacy of individual choice and conscience. Despite (or even because of) the growth of the State in the 20th century, motored by warfighting as much as welfare considerations, there remained a tough core of opposition to the State dictating or even interfering in matters of individual expression: that meant religion, the press, the arts, voluntary organization and, of course, education.

There were many sources for this liberalism – the old ‘commonwealthman’ resistance to absolute monarchy, the struggles for freedoms of the press and assembly in the 18th and 19th centuries, the rise of nonconformist religion in the mid-to-late 19th century. That latter force was intimately tied up with the development of State education, which was throughout the 19th century seen as principally religious education, and the fears of nonconformists that the State would impose Anglicanism in England severely limited the ability of the central State to dictate curricula right into the 20th century. As you probably know the 1906 Liberal landslide was due in some considerable part to nonconformist bitterness at the 1902 Education Act, which by empowering a central Board of Education (the forerunner of our

DfE) seemed to give the Church of England an inside track in schools that had formerly been controlled by locally-elected school boards. But in some ways the new dispensation created more local autonomy rather than less. While it gave some curricular and fiscal control to central government – allowing the Board of Education to set minimum standards for teaching (4 and a half hours a week for history at secondary level) – it transferred most local powers from the school board to the local authority, and it created a new class of State-funded school (the direct grant school) that was virtually independent of local or central control. The ethos remained very much that not of a national system but of a network – as one contemporary government report put it, ‘not in order to control, but rather to supervise the Secondary Education of the country, not to override or supersede local action, but to endeavour to bring about among the various agencies which provide that education a harmony and co-operation which are now wanting.’

It’s important to repeat that this resistance to central control of education was part-and-parcel of a wider liberal ethos which abhorred central-government dictation and favoured individual, local and voluntary action in matters of individual expression. A new model of government was emerging, especially after the First World War, which increased central government funding in these areas but not central control, by establishing ‘arm’s length’ bodies in receipt of and accountable for Treasury funds but not directly answerable to Parliament. (I said earlier that I wasn’t nostalgic for the good old days, but I will confess to some nostalgia for arm’s length governance.) The model had been established in the 19th century in dealing with the national museums and galleries, which allocated Treasury grants to independent boards of trustees. In that case the motivation was partly to protect the connoisseurial independence of aristocratic trustees, but it also stemmed from a wholesome conviction that Parliament shouldn’t tell the nation what kind of art to like. The model was

also evident in the 1902 Education Act which did limit what the central board could dictate to schools and local authorities. After the Liberal landslide of 1906 those limits were fiercely policed. London was surely the only capital city in Europe before 1914 where there was a debate about whether the national flag should fly in the capital's State schools. Similarly the attempts of the Earl of Meath, an eccentric Tory peer, to popularize Empire Day in the schools from 1904 led to a series of pitched battles through the 1930s between the political parties over whether to mandate its celebration in their local schools. Neither side, however, supported a private member's bill in 1928 that would have made Empire Day compulsory in all schools – the principle of local option was more important even for Conservatives.

After the First World War, when the central state began to grow rapidly, the principles of arm's length governance became more widely-used still. In the educational sphere, the government established the University Grants Committee and the Research Councils to fund research in universities on the arm's length principle; the State set the amount of grant, but largely left it up to the grants committees to disburse it. Similarly, in what is now called the Haldane Principle (after the great Liberal minister Lord Haldane who wrote the definitive report on the machinery of government in 1918), the general rule was established that research councils would be left free to fund whatever projects they thought in their expert opinion were ripe and promising – they were accountable for the funds but not for the individual funding decisions. Classically, in 1926, the BBC was set up as an independent arm's length body – not an arm of the General Post Office, as was initially intended – under a Royal Charter rather than an Act of Parliament specifically to avoid 'investing it in the mind of the public with the idea that in some way it is a creature of Parliament and connected with political activity'. In all of these areas – the arts, schools, universities, broadcasting, and also in the deliberate under-regulation of the print media – the principle was well-established that

the citizenry was highly jealous and suspicious of central-government dictation in its freedom of individual expression, especially where religious and political expression was concerned. That principle remained sacrosanct after the Second World War, and was indeed further extended, at precisely the time that the welfare state was reaching its peak. Stafford Cripps, Chancellor in the postwar Labour government, deliberately created new arm's length bodies such as the Arts Council under the protection (not control) of the Treasury to ensure that they did not fall prey to the political ambitions of his fellow ministers. George Orwell, who despite his reputation was one of the strongest advocates in the immediate post-1945 period for an interventionist State, wrote a number of powerful polemics in this period precisely to argue that the stronger the State got, the more important it was that public opinion mobilized behind freedom of expression.

For a long time after the war, this liberal ethos continued to rule in questions of school curricula. Even as the share of education spending derived from central government grant grew, and the share locally raised from the rates shrank, governments made little attempt to dictate to schools and local authorities what they should teach. One of the most astonishing illustrations of this is in the area of science and technology. Again, we all know that after the war intellectuals and politicians worried continuously about Britain's apparently inexorable decline in comparison to the US and its European neighbours. I well remember the day – it must have been sometime in the late 1970s – when supposedly the British standard of living had been overtaken by the Italians: what a moral panic that triggered. (We have since overtaken them again.) There was endless sloganeering, especially from Labour politicians from the late 1950s onwards, of the need to shake off the dead hand of the humanities from our educational system and galvanize economic growth by teaching more science and technology in schools – there was C.P. Snow's complaint about the 'two cultures' (the arts

holding sway over the sciences), Harold Wilson's promises of the 'white heat of the technological revolution', and Tony Crosland's reforms as Education Minister aimed at boosting technical education in further and higher education.

And yet the will to tell students what they should study, to tell teachers what they should teach, was not there. Neither O and A-Level choices, nor university places, were ever directly managed or rationed. The assumption remained supreme that – though you could tempt students and their parents with bribes and inducements to try something new – in the end the choice was theirs. And they chose not to study science. In 1967 the Dainton Report found that, far from science and technology gaining in A-Level choices, they were losing ground. This so-called Dainton swing caused much consternation for a time, until it was decided by the educational planners that the parents and students had been right all along – there was a tendency to choose 'a broader, less specialist, type of course to produce a more adaptable graduate and keep open a wide range of employment options', and that employers who wanted technically-skilled workers didn't expect schools and universities to train them, but would train them themselves on the job. So even at the height of national panic about economic decline, and the importance of boosting science and technology in education, there was neither the will nor the ability to mould the agenda of education on the part of central government.

Why, then, did we get a national curriculum in the 1980s? What had changed? The first thing to say is that it nearly didn't happen. For all her dirigisme in certain respects, Thatcher was not particularly interested in education at the beginning of her premiership. Her own experience as Education Minister had been an unhappy one; it wasn't 'a mainline political job' and she thought the department was packed with socialists. Her instincts were

orthodox in this respect – leave the business to the local authorities (and the reason why so many schools went comprehensive during her tenure was that local authorities were now choosing to do so in droves). As Prime Minister, she felt her core upper-working, lower-middle class constituency was relatively uninterested in education and more invested in enterprise. In the early 1980s she sought to run down both the schools and the universities budgets as part of her campaign to roll back the state. But over the course of the 1980s that attitude changed. Why exactly is still unclear. Keith Joseph and Kenneth Baker are said to have argued that the British economy desperately needed to raise its educational game – much as was said in the 1950s and 1960s, but after the economic traumas of the 1970s now with much greater force. There was evidence, too, that Thatcher’s social constituency was more interested in education as a means of social mobility than she had allowed for, and that it was clamouring for more opportunities than the existing system afforded.

Whatever the reasons, gradually a coherent policy of expansion emerged – one which started at the bottom, in specifying a national curriculum that guaranteed minimum standards for all to 14, then by merging the old CSE and GCE O Levels into GCSE created a universal school-leaving qualification at 16, and finally expanded the number of 6th-form places and university places for those with the new GCSE qualifications that gave access to A-Levels and university entrance. The pieces of this reform didn’t come in that order, and they were spread across 6 or 7 years, but the outcome was a new mass education system that (at my level) radically expanded the proportion of the age cohort attending university from about 14% to where it is now in the mid-40s.

At the bottom, as I say, was the national curriculum. In retrospect, it is curious how uncontroversial the new national curriculum was. Don’t get me wrong - I was around only on

the fringes of the debate over the national curriculum for history in the late 1980s, but I remember the tempestuous exchanges over the content of that curriculum well enough. However, in light of the previous 100 years of liberalism, what is surprising is how widespread a consensus there was that there should be a national curriculum of some sort. There was, I think, a general realization that only central government could shepherd through such a massive expansion of secondary and higher education and that some greater regulation of the educational foundation was necessary to bring up general standards to the required levels. Democracy sometimes requires solidarity as much as diversity. But there was also a realization that in a liberal culture such a national curriculum could only be safely grounded on a process that built a broad consensus. The History Working Group appointed in 1988 embraced a diverse selection of teachers, academics, administrators and local-authority representatives. It was given expert support by civil servants. It had a brief designed to appeal to both sides of the ‘skills vs. knowledge’ debate that had already been raging in the historical profession for some time. It produced an interim report in mid-1989 which was widely and hotly debated. In terms that sound eerily familiar today, the Conservative minister of the day (in his case backed by his Prime Minister) complained that the interim report had given insufficient emphasis to the acquisition of knowledge, to the importance of chronology, and to the centrality of British history. However, because the working group existed as an independent body, which by this point had built up considerable esprit de corps and was looked to really by all parties to develop a reasonable consensus, it was under no obligation to follow the minister’s advice – and on the whole, in its final report, it didn’t. It persuaded its own chair, a Northamptonshire landowner, and the department’s civil servants, that its original approach to curriculum and assessment was the right one. Its final report unleashed another round of public debate. (At this point lots of academics weighed in with the kind of feigned expertise that I am trying not to offer!) Its task was then taken up by another

publicly-constituted body, the History Task Group, which had to write the actual curriculum. Again a kind of consensus was built up. Despite some cackhanded last minute interventions by the new minister, Ken Clarke, the national curriculum for history as enacted was broadly the same as proposed by the working group's Final Report, with its diversification of the curriculum, its emphasis on understanding rather than knowledge or skills alone, and its balance between British, European and world history.

I go over this ancient history – which is probably quite familiar to many of you – obviously to point up the contrasts with the proceedings of our own dear Secretary of State. Some features of the late 1980s debate are quite familiar. The issues being debated were, you might say depressingly, similar – knowledge vs. skills, chronology vs. analysis, British history vs. other stories, and, within British history, a traditional political-history orientation vs. then new (surely today no longer new) topics such as science, technology, the arts, cultural and social history (including the then unfamiliar assertion that Britain was a multicultural society). Then as now the tabloids did their best to distort and overdramatize the debate; then as now celebrity academics were wheeled out to support one side or the other. But in other respects our policy process of the last few years has sadly been very different from the process of the late 1980s. Then there were independent bodies – the working group, the task group – which were explicitly constituted to represent a spectrum of opinion and which were expected to come to their own consensual conclusions. They did of course receive repeated instructions (and probably worse) from ministers, but they were reasonably free to take or leave them. Their reports, once published, carried a certain credibility which ministers were slow to challenge. The civil servants – here I am just guessing – played a more independent role in mediating between the expert groups and the politicians. There were more civil servants, then, better resourced, more respected by their ministers, and they were not overseen

by special political advisers to anything like the same extent. And there was more of a presupposition that, as the TES said at the time, history did not belong ‘to the government of the day’.

How different the policy process is today, a scant 25 years later. No independent body is set up to advise the minister. No attempt is made to represent all informed parties. No attempt is made to lay out dispassionately all the issues, the varying positions on them, the arguments pro and con – and needless to say public debate is impoverished as a result, reduced to speechifying and tabloid-mongering from fixed positions, playing winners and losers. When an expert group is set up, its brief is narrow and ill-defined, its recommendations are ignored, and it collapses in acrimony. The celebrity academics are recruited as ‘advisers’, but their roles are unclear, their involvement intermittent, and their recommendations are ignored, too, and so figures as disparate intellectually and politically as Niall Ferguson and Simon Schama have stomped back to America in high dudgeon. After two years of policy-making by press release, a draft curriculum is suddenly rustled out of nowhere – bearing little or no relation to anything that had been previously discussed or circulated by any of the alleged advisers, and apparently drafted by a small set of non-specialists inside the department. It bears the marks of the minister’s personal predilections, and by all appearances the civil servants themselves are very embarrassed about it. It is circulated in advance to a secret set of advisers, but they are all told individually that they mustn’t mention it to anyone else on pain of death or dismemberment, and so no collective discussion of the draft is possible before its release. Unsurprisingly given this process, it is so muddled and impractical that it is almost immediately sent back for redraft. This time an expert group representing some of the various interests has been assembled. But its membership is also secret, and was cobbled together haphazardly at short notice. They too

are told not to consult with anyone else. A new draft is expected at any moment. It will be better. But it will bear the scars of this terrible process. It won't have built any consensus inside or outside the history professions; it is being touted by planned leaks from within the government on an overtly party-political basis (as an alternative to 'Labour's dumbed-down curriculum' – a shocking violation of the Thatcher-era expectation that the curriculum must not be portrayed for good or ill as the creature of party interests). And I predict it will not long outlive the current government.

I don't want to dwell on the inadequacies of the draft curriculum, precisely because it is in the process of being torn up and rewritten. But I'll conclude with some remarks about what the politicians and their special advisers responsible for the current process seem to think a national curriculum for history is for, what role it plays in our modern educational system, and what in contrast I think it could and should be for. First, of course, it's not entirely clear that the present generation of politicians does believe any longer in a national curriculum. Here we can see at work what I call the divided consciousness of the post-Thatcher Conservative party – wishing to be at the same time old-fashioned dirigiste conservatives and new-model free-market liberals. So on the one hand we have a national curriculum announced by the minister to possess all sorts of high-minded qualities that the old one lacked – 'to entrench higher expectations', to foster 'a culture of greater ambition', to expect more, to get children to know more, inspired by a socialist advocate of uplift, R.H. Tawney, who said, 'what a wise parent would wish for their children, so the State must wish for all its children'. (As it happens, I agree with a lot of that.) But, on the other hand, it won't be a national curriculum at all, because the minister wants all secondary schools to be academies and they must be left entirely free to teach what they want. Indeed, in his last speech (the one that so grossly distorted the views of the HA on primary teaching), the one

that touted the ability of a revised national curriculum to lift up the nation, he also tells teachers to ignore what the government tells them – ‘if your school, or you as a teacher, are told that your lesson must conform to a particular pattern to pass muster with the inspectors, just say “no”...– you are free to teach as you wish.’ So the national curriculum is capable of great things, but you should take it or leave it as you wish. This reflects, as I say, the divided consciousness of a party that thinks in true 1950s style that the man in Whitehall does know best, but also in true 1980s Thatcherite style that every individual parent, teacher and student knows best, on alternate weeks.

Well, perhaps the way to square this circle is to see the role of the minister as the man in the bully pulpit, as Teddy Roosevelt described the presidency – or, to use a more appropriate analogy, in the Gladstonian role of the exhorter who shows the people the promised land but wants them to get there on their own steam. So let’s view the draft national curriculum as an indicator of what the minister thinks an ideal history curriculum is, but not a national, compulsory one. The first thing to say about it is that it’s a politician’s curriculum. When I said this to the civil servants at the DfE, they looked puzzled – but look, they said, it has the Tolpuddle Martyrs and the suffragettes. I didn’t say it was a Tory politician’s curriculum – I said it was a politician’s curriculum. It thinks the main function of a history curriculum is to tell the story of Britain’s – or, really, England’s – political institutions. Thus the inclusion of otherwise inexplicable topics such as the Heptarchy (a relic of the way in which historians of the making of the English nation told the story in the 19th century). An early draft talked about the rise of democracy from Magna Carta to the present, until I pointed out that Britain was not the first but the last country in Europe to enact universal manhood suffrage, and what did that tell us about the rise of democracy? The current draft specifies for the 20th century a picture of ‘Britain transformed’ – by what? a

series of political events – the ending of the House of Lords veto, suffragism, the First World War, the first Labour government, the abdication of Edward VIII, the Second World War, the end of Empire, the Attlee Government, the welfare state, the Race Relations Act, other social reforms in Parliament, membership of the European Union, and so on. These are all worthy subjects, which I teach to undergraduates, but they are a peculiar selection – as I say, a politician’s curriculum. Politicians are the heroes and they and their political institutions are the fulcrum around which most of the major historical events pivot. There is nothing about ‘Britain transformed’ by the rise of the mass media (from radio and cinema to television and the internet), or by secularization, or by women’s entry into the labour market, or by youth sub-cultures, or by consumerism, or by globalization, or by the ebb and flow of equality and inequality, or by family limitation, or by Americanization, or by social mobility, or by environmental change or ideas of history and heritage. These are also all subjects I teach to undergraduates – but they don’t figure on the minister’s radar, because they take place mostly outside of Westminster, and the protagonists of these stories are not MPs or generals or diplomats but ordinary women, men and children. They are, surely, just as legitimate subjects of study – they will tell you, surely, just as much if not more about how the world came to be the way it is as studying Chamberlain and Salisbury and the Treaty of Rapallo – and actually I think they will do a better job of developing students’ conceptual and analytical skills (for general purposes) than the tedious business of memorizing a sequence of regnal dates or premierships.

Similarly, the grim English-centredness of the curriculum also mirrors the world as seen from Westminster. The fact that school curricula are now diverging across the four nations means that each is, sadly, retreating to its historic bunker – England for the English, Scotland for the Scots. And this suits the politicians who need to rebuild people’s sense of

identity and belonging around what they think will be the political unit of the future. But it is again a rather peculiar selection of the past. It means that the Enlightenment, an international movement, has to be taught as ‘the Enlightenment in England’, at its centre that famous Englishman Adam Smith, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow. It means that the wider world can only be taught when it impinges on England, or, more likely, when England impinges on it – thus Ireland and India come into the curriculum when England conquers them; Africans when the English enslave them (or, in fact, when Parliament liberates them); the United States only in the persona of Franklin Delano Roosevelt when he becomes a chum of Churchill’s. Worst of all, to my view – this will not be a popular view in this room, I think – Africans and Asians are only taught about when they immigrate to Britain. (Since I don’t think history is primarily about teaching us about ‘us’ – about who we are – and because I don’t think who we are is principally about who we were – I’m not in favour of teaching African and Asian history simply because there are now more people of African and Asian descent in Britain. We should teach African and Asian history because Africa and Asia are important parts of the world in their own right – including in periods when their peoples stayed at home – and indeed more important to us for their histories that are most alien to us, because it is from the least familiar things that we are likely to learn most.)

I am all in favour of teaching citizenship: let there be a citizenship curriculum which teaches students about their political institutions (with an emphasis on the present, though their history as well). But that is not what history is for. History is the incredibly varied story of human experience around the world over thousands of years – it shares with the study of literature and geography and religious studies the task of introducing to children to the manifold ways in which it is possible to be human (politically, socially, culturally, intellectually, economically and in lots of different ways). Of course we must teach our

national history – for all sorts of reasons: because it is close to home, it offers unique opportunities in terms of sources and direct physical experiences; because it is familiar, we can perhaps get further into its depths; and because we live here, it does tell us something about us, and can contribute to a sense of solidarity that is useful not only to politicians but also to civil society. But that is surely a small part of what history is and can do. To me the most disturbing aspect of the non-debate over the national curriculum is this narrowing of vision that results from politicians and journalists (whose livelihoods also depend on drawing attention to national politics, even when most of the punters aren't interested) dominating the public discussion. And this is where, finally, I think academic historians do have something to contribute – to remind us of the wider horizons that academic history has been exploring over the last few generations but that still has made only a limited impact on the school curriculum.

History is too important to be left to the politicians. If we leave it to them, it will become all about them. Let's keep striving to open up the history curriculum to those new and diverse influences. In my department, a generation ago we taught almost exclusively the history of Britain and Europe (and those were two different topics), and principally political history. We were still in the shadow of the political uses of history for nation-building in the 19th century. But academic history has been determinedly shucking off that role now for decades. Today we teach the history of all parts of the world over millennia. Of course we still teach British and European history – and indeed we still require our first and second-year students to do about a third of their options in British history, including one in political history. But we also offer courses on the history of every other part of the world, and on themes as diverse as the history of collecting, of the body, of migration, of religious conversion, of utopian writing, of total war, of material culture and food and drink. I continue

to believe that these themes can be made as vital and as significant to teenagers as Hitler and the Henries.

And so I end by echoing half of that message that I quoted earlier from our colleague writing in the 1930s – writing, in fact, tellingly, just after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. I don't think in our large and diverse educational system we can rely any longer only on the 'freedom of the individual teacher' to safeguard the integrity of the subject. Because I do share Tawney's (and, sometimes, Gove's) view that the State has a responsibility to offer to all its children a fair sampling of knowledge, experience and understanding about life on earth, past and present – to equip them for the practical challenges of their own life, but also to broaden their horizons, and to give them intellectual tools to help them create and add to our stock of knowledge, experience and understanding – for those reasons, I am in favour of a national curriculum. I think it has served us well for the last 25 years in offering a framework for the study of history, agreed by public discussion between teachers, academics, policymakers, pedagogues and the general public.

But at the same time I do believe with our friend from the 1930s that 'history cannot be put into a strait-jacket, and it should not be taught for particular ends, national or international.' Twenty-five years ago the History Working Group did a good job, I think, of walking that tightrope between freedom and direction, and in carrying on a national discussion without letting any one party dominate and direct the curriculum to their sectional, political ends. Sadly we have not been able to meet their standard in our own time. But we will get another chance, sooner or later, and perhaps, for once (I don't say this often), we can learn from history.