



## The very marrow of the national idea: The Frontier Wars and the Australian curriculum

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### ABSTRACT

Prior to the 1970s Indigenous issues were largely absent from Australian history classrooms. Schools largely taught British and European history, an approach grounded in a hagiographic treatment of European settlement and the nation's experience of foreign wars. The wave of non-British post-Second World War migration and an increased focus on Australia's relationship with the United States, including its strategic importance as a Pacific nation, made a white, male, mono-cultural national identity increasingly difficult to maintain. Political parties from the Left and Right have repeatedly clashed over their competing conceptions of the core elements of Australia's national identity, which in turn has underpinned a sustained controversy over the development of a national history curriculum and the classroom practice it shapes. In particular, the question of how the Australian Frontier Wars can be taught within a socio/cultural context that celebrates foreign wars as the birthplace of the nation and considers European settlement to be an overwhelmingly benign process is one of the central controversies that has marred the development and evolution of the Australian Curriculum: History.

### KEYWORDS

Frontier Wars, Australian Curriculum, History Curriculum, National Identity

### CITATION

Bedford, A., Kerby, M., Baguley, M., & Maddock, D. (2023). The very marrow of the national idea: Frontier wars and the Australian curriculum. *Historical Encounters*, 10(2), 22-37.  
<https://doi.org/10.52289/hej10.203>

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## Introduction

As Sir Michael Howard, lauded as “Britain's greatest living historian” (Hastings, 2013, p. 13) and “Britain's foremost expert on conflict” (Thorpe, 2019) observed, “it is hard to think of any nation-state... which was not created, and had its boundaries defined, by wars, by internal violence, or by a combination of the two” (Howard, 1991, p. 39). Indeed, conflict is entrenched into “the very marrow of the national idea” (Samuel, 1998, p. 8). Australia is no exception; indeed, it is a nation that has installed its military history as the bedrock of national identity, a sacred parable above criticism (McKenna, 2010), and a grand narrative that emphasises the role of Australian military engagements and the Anzac spirit in shaping the nation (Lake, 2010). Nevertheless, the Frontier Wars fought against Australia's First Nations peoples, “one of the few significant wars in Australian history and arguably the single most important one” (Reynolds, 2013, p. 248), struggles to find a place in this “inviolable foundation story” (McKenna, 2014, p. 153). Until recently, the Frontier Wars rarely impinged on popular discussions of Australian history, with Gallipoli, Pozières, Passchendaele, Amiens, Tobruk, Kokoda, El Alamein, Long Tan, and a host of other foreign battlefields framing the nation's imagining of conflict. A visit to the battlefields of the First World War has become almost a rite of passage for Australians, yet the sites of First Nations resistance and massacre in Australia are only recently being more widely acknowledged.

The violence of the fighting on the Australian frontier was “widespread, well-orchestrated and committed continent-wide from occupation until far into the 20th century” (Daley, 2014, para. 6). Between 1788 and 1928 it is conservatively estimated that at least 22,000 men women and children, 20,000 of them Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, were killed either in official or non-official actions. The fighting involved atrocities that were “gruesome even by the standards of the day” (Rogers & Bain, 2016, p. 87). The growing recognition of the extent and nature of the violence has brought with it some significant challenges. At times, it is pervaded by a discourse of massacre rather than resistance. Similarly, the belated recognition of Indigenous service in the Australian military serves to bolster rather than challenge what some dismiss as a militaristic, nationalist ideology (Gibson, 2014). The question of how the Frontier Wars can be taught within a socio-cultural context that has traditionally celebrated foreign wars as the birthplace of the nation and considers European settlement to be an overwhelmingly benign process is one of the central issues that define the development and evolution of the *Australian Curriculum: History*.

## The Australian curriculum – the political context

The development of the Australian Curriculum has attracted the attention of numerous researchers, including Baguley et al. (2021) Brennan (2011), Ditchburn (2012), Gerrard and Farrell (2013), Harris-Hart (2010), Marsh (1994), Reid (2005, 2019), and Yates et al. (2011). As these researchers found, a nationally mandated curriculum inevitably confronts significant challenges (Apple, 1993; Brennan, 2011) that reflect “a range of social, political and economic imperatives and ideological positions” (Savage, 2016, p. 868). It is further problematised in the Australian context by a demarcation dispute. The state and territory governments retained constitutional responsibility for schooling after Federation in 1901, one that they have often proved unwilling to either share or surrender to the federal government (Baguley et al., 2021). Nevertheless, from the late 1960s and 1970s, successive federal governments increasingly began to encroach on this prerogative (Kennedy, et al., 1995). In 1968 Malcom Fraser, then Liberal Minister for Education, argued in favour of the Commonwealth reducing unnecessary differences in the educational content taught across the various states (Reid, 2005). In the 1970s the Whitlam Labor Government began providing funding directly to schools (Bartlett, 1992), a move which did little to assuage what has been for many decades a pervasive suspicion of any attempt to centralise the control of education (Mueller, 2021). In retrospect, what followed appears as a slow but inexorable move toward a national curriculum, though this belies the challenge of reaching anything approaching a consensus. For the drive toward a national curriculum was never ‘just’ an educational issue, for it was shaped by economic and social agendas which reflected neoliberal

and social democratic aspirations (Meiners, 2017; Lingard, 2010). *The Hobart Declaration on Schooling* (MYCEETA, 1989), which included common and agreed goals for schooling in Australia is a case in point. In any other context it might have indicated a broad agreement about curriculum development, yet five years of intensive development followed, culminating in the 1994 national Statements and Profiles for eight key learning areas (Mathematics, Technology, English, Science, Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE), Languages other than English (LOTE), the Arts, and Health (which included Physical Education and Personal Development) (Kennedy, et al., 1995). In 1999, *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* (MYCEETA, 1999) continued the process of centralisation by making government funding contingent on “recipient jurisdiction implementation of requirements” (Bezzina, et al., 2009, p. 547; Brennan, 2011).

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MYCEETA, 2008) subsequently outlined the agreed national purpose and role of schooling, central to which was the economic aims of both education and economic prosperity (Carter, 2018). By the time the Rudd Labor Government was elected in November 2007, the states and territories were offering a “wary and somewhat qualified” support for a national curriculum (Reid, 2019, p. 200). Julia Gillard, the Federal Education Minister and later Prime Minister, established the National Curriculum Board (NCB) in early 2008 comprised of representatives from each of the states and territories, who were tasked with developing Kindergarten (K)/Preparatory (P) to Year 10 courses in Mathematics, Science, History and English for a proposed rollout in 2011. The NCB became the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in December 2008. The current Australian Curriculum was, and remains, the responsibility of this independent statutory authority. Like the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), which developed the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, ACARA eventually assumed an unprecedented policy development role (Savage, 2016). Policy documents and educational programs subsequently initiated throughout 2009 included the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), the *Australian Early Development Index* (AEDI), the *Digital Education Revolution* (DER), and the *Building Education Revolution* (BER).

## **The Australian curriculum: History – the educational context**

As many Australian researchers have noted, the past 35 years has witnessed a positioning of education in Australia as a “a site of contestation” (Fozdar & Martin, 2021, p. 132; Clark, 2010; Macintyre & Clark, 2003). Political parties from the Left and Right have repeatedly clashed over their competing conceptions of the core elements of national identity, which in turn helped generate a sustained controversy over the development of a history curriculum and the classroom practice it shapes. For as John Tate (2009) observes, “all articulations of ‘nation’ are inherently political, and inherently contestable, since unlike the ‘state’, the ‘nation’ has no obvious or objective borders, and so its boundaries, along with the inevitable corollary of who is included and who is excluded from the nation, depends on how the ‘nation’ is defined” (p. 97). As Tate (2009) further argues, “who is included and who is excluded from the nation, therefore, is by no means self-evident: it depends on who succeeds in advancing the dominant conception of ‘nation’ at a given point in time, including what ascriptive characteristics make for inclusion or exclusion” (p. 101). This has a particular resonance for those seeking to engage with First Nations issues in the history curriculum, for this group has traditionally been so marginal to the popular conception of nation that they were not compulsorily counted as part of the population until Australians voted to change the constitution on 27 May 1967.

Prior to the 1970s, First Nations peoples were only briefly mentioned in the curriculum as a homogenous group who are either the perpetrators or victims of frontier violence (Sharp, 2013, p.189) or as part of the natural world (Sharp, 2013, p.182) rather than a civilisation with its own long history. Issues were usually absent from Australia’s history classrooms. Schools taught largely British and European history, an approach grounded in a hagiographic treatment of European settlement and the nation’s experience of foreign wars. The legislative achievements of

the early Australian parliaments following Federation in 1901 are a case in point. They were essentially defensive: a white Australia, an Australian navy, compulsory military training, tariffs, and arbitration which were all geared to protecting the new nation's sovereignty, her racial unity, and her living standards (White, 1981). Nationhood was thereby defined as much by what it defended against as it was by what it stood for. As a white settler society, Australia embraced a perception of Britain as the "motherland" and Australians as part of a "wider community of Britons". In turn, this "created a powerful vision of the national identity for school children" (Jackson, 2017, p. 167). However, the wave of non-British post-Second World War migration, Australia's location as a Pacific nation, and an increased focus on the relationship between Australia and the United States altered how national identity was perceived. Britain, "once at the heart of definitions of citizenship and historical narratives, was quietly abandoned by an educational establishment that struggled to find a coherent identity to replace it" (Jackson, 2017, p. 181). First Nations peoples and histories have not readily found a place in this vacuum and have instead remained politically contentious.

Prior to the introduction of the Australian Curriculum in the late 2000s, each Australian state and territory was responsible for their own curriculum design, though First Nations history was usually addressed in the senior syllabi for Years 11 and 12 students. Educational developments in the state of Queensland are a useful case study. As late as 1987, the Queensland *Senior Syllabus Modern History* makes no direct acknowledgement of First Nations perspectives or experiences, instead noting only that:

Students will be expected to acquire an understanding of the values and practices endorsed by the majority of Australians, and of the historical forces which have moulded them. Significant challenges to those values and practices should also be investigated. A key focus should be on the question of whether there is a distinctive Australian national character' embodying a distinctive Australian nationalism. (BSSS, 1987).

The suggested content betrays a lukewarm commitment to First Nations history. It includes "the destruction of Aboriginal society", "treatment of Aborigines" prior to the First World War, and a Local History Survey that includes the suggestion that "Aboriginal history in the local area could be a focus". *Unit 9: Imperialism and Racial Conflicts and Compromises* was likewise less than proscriptive in its suggestion that "A historical study of race relations in Australia" may include "Aborigines; the White Australia Policy; migrants in Australian society", each of which could serve as one of the nine possible topics (BSSS, 1987). The implication was clear – local First Nations experiences were firmly rooted in the past by being conceptualised as the "destruction of Aboriginal society" rather than an important contributor to contemporary political and social issues. This quarantining of First Nations history continues to be particularly destructive. As Amy Way (2022) argues, this "discourse of extinction" which pervaded settler-colonial thinking about First Nations peoples during the nineteenth century continues to find a place in some curriculum documents (p. 721).

During the 1990s more contemporary and inclusive conceptions of First Nations peoples began to emerge in the curriculum. The objectives for one Board of Secondary School Studies unit included "the continuing debate about how the history of Australia should be written, including the implications of the perspectives of Aboriginals, Torres Strait Islanders, women, different classes, different ethnic groups and people of various ideological beliefs; the debate about whether there is, or has been, a distinctive Australian character" (BSSS, 1995). There were also more opportunities for an exploration of the history of Indigenous peoples, with references to topics ranging from "Aboriginal cultures before European contact", to "contact and conflict between Aboriginal and European peoples", "Historiographical debates about Australia Traditional Aboriginal versions of the past", "Continuing debates about how Australia's history should be constructed", "'Establishment' histories reflecting Anglo-Celtic notions of cultural superiority and the primacy of 'development' and 'progress'", "the promotion of these histories as consensual and unproblematic" and "Historiographical challenges to establishment from

feminist, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, ecological and alternative ideological perspectives, particularly in recent decades". Notably, there was also reference to "The life of Aboriginal peoples in Australia in the early years after Federation with reference to government policies, other institutional influences and relations between Aboriginals and other Australians in various settings social and cultural life in Australia between 1901 and 1914" (BSSS, 1995). This represented a dramatic shift, not only in content but in the focus on historiography and the recognition of the differing perspectives evident in both primary sources and amongst historians.

As always, however, the discussion was never just about education. Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating (1991-1996) was enthusiastic though selective in his use of Australian history as an explanatory tool justifying contemporary political ambitions, notably closer engagement with Asia, Australia becoming a republic, and a 'reconciliation' between Australians of European origin and First Nations Australians (Macintyre & Clark, 2003; Watson, 2002). Keating may well be largely responsible for making history a political issue, but it was his successor, the conservative John Howard (1996-2007), who better appreciated the centrality of history to a battle of ideas between the 'black armband' and 'three cheers' view of Australian history. In simplistic terms, this clash can be characterised as one side alleging that the other has no pride in Australia's history, and the other that its opponents wish to censor Australian history and deny the truth about the history of Aboriginal dispossession and the White Australia policy (McKenna, 1997). Howard (1996) believed that "the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed" (para. 94). His mobilising of Australian history as part of the 'history wars' was not merely a counterpoint to Keating's, for it was in fact "radically different". For while Keating "sought to accompany his modernising economic project with measures to modernise Australia's polity and cultural life, Howard sought to implement reassuringly conservative social and cultural policies, while continuing to pursue neoliberal economic reform" (Bonnell & Crotty, 2008, p. 152). In making sustained references to the Australian nation, and "its reputed qualities, characteristics and achievements", Howard referred not just to what "he believed already existed, and which also existed in the minds of his listeners but ... also engaging in the further construction and articulation of that concept". Though he acknowledged that people should be "free to express their own identity" he believed that "there is a vast difference between tolerance, respect, understanding and indeed welcome for that diversity that now makes up this county and its unique identity and a government committed to elevate a whole range of different cultures, customs and values and accord them all equal status within the Australian way of life" (Liberal Party of Australia & National Party of Australia, 1988, pp. 92-93). British-Australian culture was, in this construct, the "core culture" into which other cultures should "blend" (Howard, 2006, para. 8).

As part of a "root and branch renewal of the teaching of Australian history in our schools" intended to challenge the "postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated" (Howard, 2006 a, para. 41), the Howard government initiated a National Inquiry into Teaching History (2000) and convened a National History Summit (2006) to begin drafting a national History curriculum. One of its main recommendations was that History should be a compulsory part of the curriculum in all Australian schools in years 9 and 10. The Australian History External Reference Group which was then commissioned to develop a Guide to Teaching Australian History in Years 9 and 10 achieved little given the Howard government's election defeat in November 2007. In April 2008, the Kevin Rudd Labor government established the independent National Curriculum Board followed in September by the appointment of four academics to draft broad framing documents in four subject areas: History (Stuart Macintyre), English (Peter Freebody), Science (Denis Goodrum) and Mathematics (Peter Sullivan). The following year saw the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) established to oversee the implementation of the national curriculum. The release of a draft national curriculum in March 2010 did not ease the tensions inherent in a process that was criticised by some as a form of "coercive nationalism" (Harris-Hart, 2010, p. 295).



The 2004 Queensland senior syllabus works as a political weathervane, as it was written amidst the ‘History Wars’ that would come to define the development of the first iteration of the Australian Curriculum and echoes many of the conservative concerns of the period. Opportunities to address First Nations experiences lacked detail, with *Theme 7: Studies of Diversity* suggesting a study of “Aboriginal heritage and role of Indigenous peoples past and present” as an option, and *Theme 15: History and historians* suggesting “Ownership and historical evidence: recovering, recording and interpreting evidence, for example, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history”. As has been argued elsewhere, this

perhaps reflects the influence of the History Wars in stymieing the process of reconciliation; as the explicit and implicit recognition of the negative impacts of imperial colonisation (i.e., invasion) present in the 1995 syllabus has been ‘sanitised’ into a politically correct rendering of “all groups of people”. While there is a clear reduction in the explicit acknowledgment of First Nations experience, the recommended elements of the syllabus include “some study of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians”. (Bedford & Wall, 2020)

This marked a return to a position which minimises both the degree of conflict and the extent of harm to First Nations peoples and cultures. The aforementioned history syllabus remained in place for the next 15 years without substantial revision. This is significant not just in educational terms, for Queensland was the site of the most violent colonial frontier in Australia, the most frequent reports of shootings and massacres of First Nations people, the three deadliest massacres of white settlers, the most disreputable frontier police force, and the highest number of white victims to frontier violence (Ørsted-Jensen, 2011). In 1886, one colonial official wrote that Queensland was “a comparatively uneducated community which has shown itself notably regardless of the commonest rights of humanity in respect of the black native tribes within its own territory” (Queensland State Archives, 1886). The frontier violence is inscribed on the land itself, with placenames marking sites of conflict. ‘Massacre Inlet’ in north Queensland and ‘Murdering Creek’ near Noosa are just two sites whose English language names commemorate frontier violence (Ryan, 2022).

In 2019, the Queensland curriculum underwent its most significant reform in more than 40 years. Reflecting the significant social change and ongoing political debates about both the content of the history curriculum and its teaching, the new syllabus explicitly engages with frontier violence, with the unit on the Frontier Wars being one of two compulsory Indigenous-focused topic options (the other is the Indigenous civil rights movement post 1967) (QCAA, 2019). The support materials for the syllabus make clear that links between the events of the period and contemporary issues (such as the renaming of the electorate of Batman in 2018, named after a grazier who had massacred First Nations peoples in Tasmania, and later negotiated a dubious ‘treaty’ with other first Nations peoples whereby he traded thousands of hectares of land for tools, blankets and food, thereby indelibly linking his name to the founding of Melbourne) are a suitable outcome of the study, which works to counter the ‘extinction’ narrative that was promoted in earlier studies of First Nations histories.

## **The Australian Curriculum: History (Version 9) - the educational context and the question of what is taught and how**

This brief case study of Queensland’s senior curriculum (Years 11 – 12) over time, which is not bound as stringently to the expectations of ACARA and covers a much larger time span than the national curriculum, is enlightening. It provides a different model indicating what is possible in terms of teaching young Australians about our foundational conflict – a lesson that the writers of Version 9 of the Australian Curriculum appear not to have learnt. Curriculum reform over time both mirrors and exposes how curriculum works as a political intermediary, navigating the dominant views of those in power at the time of its conception or revision. It is for this reason that

the teaching of history is also a vital consideration, as it is the classroom history teachers who daily must deal with curriculum reform and implementation across various iterations.

The most recent iteration of the curriculum, Version 9, was overseen by the conservative Liberal National coalition, who reduced the amount of content that needs to be covered, but increased coverage of post-colonial Australian history, with five of eight required units being framed around Australia's experience of or role in global events. One new topic in Year 7, *Deep Time Australia* explores pre-colonisation First Nations peoples cultures, knowledges and practices. While media and academic commentary has tended to focus on the heavy emphasis on post-colonisation Australian history and the debates about how history should be taught, less attention has been given to how First Nations history, particularly the approximately 130 years of frontier conflict that defines Australia's emergence as a federated nation has been addressed. For while the Frontier Wars has become a core topic in various state and territory Modern History senior syllabi, not all students select this subject, and the topic is only briefly addressed in Version 9 of the Years 7-10 Australian Curriculum in a Year 9 unit.

The curriculum is organised into three broad topics (or sub-strands) per year level, with two of these being compulsory in each year level. This design reflects the common practice of school offerings of HaSS (Humanities and Social Sciences), which delivers both History and Geography content often in a 'one semester each' model, which allows for one History topic per term to be studied in one semester. Each sub-strand provides several content descriptors which must be addressed, and within each content descriptor are a series of elaborations which provide suggestions and additional detail about what content may be included. These elaborations are optional. In Version 9, students now study one unit on pre-colonial First Nations culture, one on an ancient culture in Year 7; one on Medieval Europe, one on a non-European empire or culture in Year 8, and then four topics across Years 9 and 10 that cover colonisation and federation, World War I, World War II and 'Building Modern Australia' (ACARA, 2022a). Four of the eight compulsory topics are now focused on post-contact Australian history, which serves to distort students' understanding of Australia's role in global relations and further minimises the histories of other cultures and places (only one topic requires non-European history), including that of First Nations peoples. One unit that does focus on First Nations peoples covers important concepts such as deep time, culture, and relationship with Country, yet there is still a strong sense of their culture being presented in the past tense, with only a passing recognition of how cultural beliefs and practices have persisted and are maintained today.

The portion of the Years 7-10 curriculum that covers the Frontier Wars is included in a unit entitled "Making and transforming the Australian nation" (1759 – 1914), with one of seven content descriptors covering the period of invasion and expansion. Scope to address the Frontier Wars is given in the content descriptor "the causes and effects of European contact and extension of settlement, including their impact on the First Nations Peoples of Australia" (ACARA, 2022a), with the optional elaborations, which serve to position First Nations peoples as the passive victims of conflict, massacre, disease and ultimately 'destroyed'. The optional elaboration includes:

- "examining the effects of colonisation, such as frontier conflict and massacres of First Nations Australians, the spread of European diseases and the destruction of cultural lifestyles".
- "analysing the impact of colonisation by the Europeans on First Nations Australians such as frontier warfare, massacres, removal from land, and relocation to 'protectorates', reserves and missions".
- "investigating how First Nations Australians responded to colonisation, including through making important contributions to various industries that were established on their lands and waters, adopting Christianity and other settler religions" and a reference to the Stolen Generations.

The final elaboration is perhaps the most troubling of all as it implies that First Nations people did not resist colonisation, but instead were willing participants who joined their local church and found employment on sheep stations without any discussion of how this often-forced assimilation

was the result of deliberate government policy and action. The one mention of 'invasion' appears in the elaboration for the content descriptor "different experiences and perspectives of colonisers, settlers, and First Nations Australians ..." which reads "exploring the perspectives and experiences of First Nations Australians, including discussing terms in relation to Australian history such as 'invasion', colonisation' and 'settlement', and why these continue to be contested within society today" (ACARA, 2022a). The terms, particularly 'invasion', remain contested because the view of the Australian government is represented in the curriculum documents and subsequently in classrooms across the nation.

Some of the efforts to address First Nations history in the curriculum do not pay the dividends that one might expect. 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures' is one of three Cross-Curriculum Priorities (CCPs) which are meant to be embedded across the curriculum, however, they are not assessable and are often not a core focus of teacher planning or delivery. The word 'invasion' does not appear in the Year 7-10 curriculum content descriptors, and only once in an optional elaboration and once in the CCPs. The only curriculum descriptor which specifically references frontier violence is, "The occupation and colonisation of Australia by the British, under the now overturned doctrine of *terra nullius*, were experienced by First Nations Australians as an invasion that denied their occupation of, and connection to, Country/Place" (ACARA, 2022b). There are two important points to note here- the term *terra nullius* is used far more regularly than it is understood, for there was in fact no legal doctrine that supported the claim that inhabited land could in fact be regarded as ownerless. It was not the basis of official policy, either in the eighteenth century or before, and appears to have only developed as a legal theory in the nineteenth century (Borch, 2001). Indeed, far from shaping policy from the early days of European settlement, it is more likely the reverse, with the establishment of the state of New South Wales playing a significant role in the development and subsequent use of the term. Secondly, the passive phrasing that positions British action as "occupation and colonisation ... "experienced ... as an invasion". These language games absolve the British of the act of invasion altogether, as it is mediated through the subjective "experienced as". The fact that despite the guidance from the ACARA First Nations Australians Advisory Group, invasion is almost absent from the curriculum document itself, and its relative obscurity in the CCPs shows how the curriculum continues to uphold the dominant narrative of genteel settlement perpetuated in earlier iterations of the Australian Curriculum.

It is not only the history curriculum content that is heavily contested, but also *how* it should be taught. The construction of a singular national narrative is particularly effective if taught in a didactic lecture style, where the teacher is positioned as a 'sage on the stage' and knowledge, accepted as truth, is transmitted directly from teacher to student. However, contemporary history pedagogy is characterised by a student-centred inquiry approach, which relies on critical thinking, questioning, and engaging with a range of perspectives and sources. The work of Peter Seixas (2006) has been particularly influential in this shift, as his conception of 'historical thinking' has come to pervade the curriculum and teaching of history in Canada, Australia, and the UK (Bedford, 2023). In Australia, architect of the first draft of the national history curriculum, Tony Taylor (2009), was also an advocate of a more disciplinary, inquiry-based engagement with the curriculum content. While teachers hold differing views about the balance between teacher-led content delivery and students actively participating in historical inquiry, the broad consensus is that there should be elements of both in effective history classrooms (Sharp et al, 2022). Yet while professional positions differ, political agendas come to the fore, with the same conservative voices who advocate for a singular narrative advocating for a knowledge transmission model of teaching. When conservatives use the term explicit instruction, they often do so inaccurately, as genuine EI does have some scope for student development of skill working towards independent application, albeit in a rigidly scaffolded process (Archer & Hughes, 2011). This presents a particular challenge when teaching contested histories that can have direct links to student's own lives. For example, many First Nations students have family members who were a part of the Stolen Generations or are the descendants of pastoralists who have since been implicated in frontier violence. This is



another deterrent to the teaching of 'hard history' as it can cause more harm if not taught appropriately and sensitively with the guidance of First Nations people.

There is a concerted effort amongst many teachers, teacher educators and researchers to ensure that First Nations perspectives and experiences are a part of the Australian schooling experience, with over 1000 articles and books published since 2018 on the teaching of the Frontier Wars, including in textbooks for secondary students. The Frontier Wars is also regularly featured as a topic at History teacher conferences. Yet as Nakata (2007) argues "it is not possible to bring in Indigenous Knowledge and plonk it in the curriculum unproblematically" (pp. 188-189). For example, Tyson Yunkaporta's popular *8 Ways* pedagogy (2009), which foregrounds Indigenous ways of learning, and approaches that are specific to the teaching of the Frontier Wars using a demythologising pedagogy (Bedford & Wall 2020), exists in a socio-cultural context that too readily adopts an oppositional framing of Aboriginal and Western knowledge systems (Yunkaporta, 2009). As Daniel Hradsky (2022) argues, "only when Indigenous peoples control what, how, and why First Nations content is taught, can Australian education contribute to the decolonising process, and thus reconciliation" (p. 155).

The challenge facing teachers in ensuring students know about this key period in our national history is two-fold: not only is the inclusion of Indigenous peoples and experiences across the history curriculum difficult to navigate, but teachers also often lack the confidence to deliver this material. As Michelle Bishop et al. (2021) found, non-Indigenous teachers will often avoid covering topics which may offend students and families or which they do not feel qualified to teach, with one participant saying that "if you're not going to do it well, don't do it" (p. 202). This hesitation by some teachers to teach First Nations content in case they 'get it wrong' is exacerbated by the political climate which discourages them from attempting it in the first place.

## **Conclusion: Response to the Australian curriculum: history**

The mixed response to the national curriculum reflects broader ideological concerns, particularly regarding the Frontier Wars and the associated issues of native title and the removal of Indigenous children from their parents. Conservatives bemoaned the interest in these issues as an assault on traditional Australian values while critics on the Left believed that the curriculum was not radical enough in its challenge to outmoded beliefs and assumptions about national identity (Brett, 2013). Taylor criticised the final version as being "too close to a nationalist view of Australia's past" (Topsfield, 2008, para. 10). Taylor (2009) characterised Howard's intervention in the curriculum as an attempt "to gain ownership of Australian history in schools and create their own neoconservative master narrative" (p. 317). In contrast, the Federal Opposition Education Spokesperson Christopher Pyne, a conservative, believed that there was "a seeming over-emphasis on Indigenous culture and history and almost an entire blotting out of our British traditions and British heritage" (quoted in Brett, 2013, p. 11). One of his successors, Alan Tudge argued that even when the curriculum was revised in 2021 it would lead to students being taught a negative view of Australia history, a statement that the James Melino, Victoria's education minister derided as "ham-fisted culture wars rubbish" (Visontay & Hurst, 2021, para. 2). Salter and Maxwell (2016) offer a more articulate though no less impassioned criticism of the concerns of people such as Tudge when they observed that it sought to "heap privilege upon privilege by recommending that a curriculum already steeped in the histories and traditions of the West be 'balanced' by adding even more Western civilisation to the curriculum" (p. 308).

That the discussion goes well beyond academic issues is hardly surprising given that school curriculum, as Kenny (2019) reminds us, is a cultural construction; one better understood as the 'nation's curriculum' rather than a national curriculum.

The debates are not merely academic – they are debates about a nation's soul. About its values. About its beliefs. Curriculum is not a technical field, although there are technical aspects to it – but to confuse the technical and the cultural is highly problematic. It is one thing to produce a national curriculum – a technical

task. It is quite another to capture a nation's soul by articulating valued knowledge, skills and beliefs that will benefit young people in the future. (Kenny, 2019, p. 121)

When people perceive that 'their' nation is underacknowledged, ignored or even threatened by the curriculum, they seek redress. Christian Schools Australia (2021) distanced themselves from the narrow phrase "Christian Heritage" and instead sought an acknowledgement of the "enormous impact of both Christians and Christian organisations on the shape of modern Australia and the framework of Judeo-Christian thinking and beliefs as the basis for the common values of our society". They suggested that the three cross curriculum priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and sustainability be augmented with a fourth that focuses on Western/Judeo influences. Conservative academics such as Kevin Donnelly (2021) were less restrained, lamenting that under the auspices of Leftist ideologues "Christianity is [being] banished from the public square and the state is sponsoring neo-Marxist inspired gender and sexuality programs" (para. 16). These views were amplified and twisted by those with an unapologetically reactionary agenda such as the private organisation ADVANCE (n.d.), which argues that radical politicians, bureaucrats, and inner-city elites were turning classrooms into "critical race theory training camps" that "cancel the teaching of freedoms that underpin Australian democracy, including freedom of speech, association, and religion". While some of the elective senior History syllabi now acknowledge and explore the Frontier Wars, as the Queensland example shows, this foundational conflict is not a compulsory topic for all Australian students. The Anzac legend and the benign nature of European settlement remain core tenets of a widespread conception of national identity. The inclusion of First Nations history cannot challenge their prominence in the wider imagination unless the national curriculum lays the groundwork for authentic change.

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