

Article

History in Schools and the Problem of “The Nation”

Terry Haydn

School of Education, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK; E-Mail: t.haydn@uea.ac.uk

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Abstract: The article examines the enduring popularity of a form of school history which is based predominantly on the idea that the transmission of a positive story about the national past will inculcate in young people a sense of loyalty to the state; a reassuring and positive sense of identity and belonging; and a sense of social solidarity with fellow citizens. England is one of the countries which has to at least some extent moved away from this model of school history; but the past few years have seen suggestions for a move back to a history curriculum which focuses predominantly on the transmission of ‘Our Island Story’; and which presents a positive rendering of that story. The history curriculum in England is currently under review; and public pronouncements by politicians; academic historians and newspaper editorials suggest strong pressures towards a restoration of what is often termed ‘traditional’ school history; which was prevalent in English schools before the advent of what has been termed ‘New history’ in the 1970s. The paper questions some of the arguments which have been put forward in order to justify a return to a history curriculum based on a positive and unproblematic narrative of the national story and suggests that such a course of action is based on some unexamined assumptions and a limited understanding of pedagogy and learning. The final section of the paper outlines several weaknesses and flaws in the arguments for reverting to a traditional (*i.e.* ‘nation-based’ and celebratory) form of school history; and some of the dangers inherent in such a project.

Keywords: history teaching; curriculum; nation state; citizenship; socialization; humanities education

1. School History and ‘The Nation’

This paper considers two questions related to the teaching of history in schools. First; to what extent should school history be based around the teaching of the story of the nation’s past? And second; to what extent should the teaching of the national past attempt to present a positive picture of the nation’s past, rather than a dispassionately objective and critical one?

For most of the time that history has been part of the school curriculum, the rationale for its inclusion has been based predominantly on the idea that the transmission of a positive story about the national past will inculcate in young people a sense of loyalty to the state, a reassuring and positive sense of identity and belonging [1–3]. Aldrich describes the history curriculum which pertained in England until the 1970s as ‘cast in a broadly self-congratulatory and heroic, high-political mould’ [4], and Gilbert [5] also makes the point that the story or narrative that was told in history lessons in England was essentially positive, uncritical and unproblematic. The key themes to be transmitted to pupils were the development of a beneficent system of parliamentary democracy, Britain’s rise to great power status through the industrial revolution and the acquisition of a (benevolently administered) empire, and Britain’s triumph in the two major conflicts of the twentieth century (see Baker, 1988 for an example of this narrative) [6]. Another characteristic of ‘traditional’ school history was that it was essentially a ‘received’ subject, in the sense that pupils were given a story or stories that were to be considered as factually correct, and not subject to controversies of interpretation. Aldrich characterised the situation as that it was seen as the duty of the academic historian to establish the historical record, and the job of the school teacher to transmit this record to pupils in simplified form, and as ‘fact’ [4]. The idea that ‘more than one story might be told’ from the remnants of the national past was not a feature of school history, or at least, not until Advanced level study (the examination for the comparatively small proportion of pupils who continued to study the subject from the age of 16 onwards).

However, England was one of a number of countries that moved away from this ‘traditional’ model of school history centered on transmitting a positive ‘canon’ of the national past [7–9]. This was reflected in the first National Curriculum for history which was introduced in 1991, which mandated a balance between British, European and World history, and between political, economic, social and cultural history. It also placed significant emphasis on the importance of developing pupils’ disciplinary understanding, and the development of young people’s critical literacy, including the idea that young people should learn that the past could be interpreted in different ways [10].

The past decade has seen a reaction against this move away from the use of school history to tell the (positive) story of the nation state. A number of newspaper articles have lamented the fact that because of this move away from traditional school history, young people appear to know nothing of their nation’s past [11–13]. A number of high profile academic historians also made contributions to the debate about what form school history should take, with predominantly negative and scathing comments on the move away from traditional school history based around the transmission of the story of the national past. David Starkey talked of ‘the shambolic travesty that is history in the National Curriculum’; Niall Ferguson talked of ‘junk history’, and Simon Schama described the situation in secondary schools as ‘absolutely dire (...) History A level is a farce’ [14–16].

Politicians and policymakers also expressed concern about the move away from the use of school history to inculcate national pride and celebrate the nation's progress towards liberal democracy, religious tolerance and general prosperity. It is perhaps interesting to note that this included politicians of the left, not just those on the right. Tony Blair stressed the importance of pupils learning 'British history', and Gordon Brown argued for a 'National Museum of History', which would foster national pride, and for the explicit teaching of 'Britishness' as part of the school curriculum [17,18]. Although the reasons for the left's espousal of a form of school history aimed at cultivating national pride must be to at least some extent subject to conjecture, there is the possibility that politicians of all parties believe that eulogizing the national story and proclaiming the virtues of being British will play well with the electorate (both Blair and Brown were frequently photographed with the Union Jack (national flag) in the picture. (In the words of Ledru-Rollin, 'I am their leader, I must follow them').

Although it is important to understand that support for a positive and 'national' form of school history came from politicians of the left as well as the right, the campaign against 'new history' gained momentum with the inception of a Conservative led coalition government in 2010. Although the main focus of this paper is to consider the *implications* of constructing a history curriculum around a celebratory and 'heroic' story of the national past, rather than the reasons behind such a project, it is important to note that these changing shifts in the nature of the history curriculum in England cannot be understood as simply the evolving consensus of a professional community of practice. Stephen Ball's influential *Policymaking in education, explorations in policy sociology* [19] emphasized the ideological influences on the construction of a National Curriculum in the UK in the late 1980s. In his analysis of the formulation of the original National Curriculum for history which was introduced in 1991, Phillips also stresses the influence of 'New Right' ideology, 'a mixture of neo-liberal market individualism and neo-conservative emphasis upon authority, discipline, hierarchy, the nation and strong government' [20]. Recent government statements about history in schools might be seen as a renewed attempt at what Ball terms the project of 'cultural restorationism'; the attempt to use the education system, and school history in particular, as a means of promoting values and dispositions associated with 'New Right' ideological positions and preferences [21]. This is not to suggest that influences on the form of school history are purely ideological in nature: events such as the 7/7 bombings in the UK led to calls to strengthen education for social cohesion; historians of different methodological persuasions and backgrounds have contributed to the recent public debate on school history, and the history teaching community itself is not without 'a view' on the nature and purpose of school history. Acknowledging the complexity and comparative influence of factors influencing curriculum formulation is only one part of building an understanding of the ramifications of constructing a history curriculum based around a particular narrative of the national story.

An analysis of the public pronouncements of the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, gives an indication of the extent to which there are high-level pressures for a return to a form of school history based around a positive rendering of the nation's past. In a speech to the Conservative Party Conference in 2010, he argued that 'the current approach to school history denies children the opportunity to hear our island story... Well, this trashing of our past has to stop [22]. He has acknowledged being 'an unashamed traditionalist when it comes to the curriculum', arguing that 'most people would rather their children had a traditional education, with children sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England', and adding that 'Lessons should celebrate, not denigrate Britain's

role through the ages, including the empire (...). Guilt about Britain's past is misplaced [23]. It is worth noting that the call for a return to more traditional forms of school history is not limited to matters of curriculum content, but also extends to a call for a return to traditional teaching methods, with more emphasis on rote learning, the acquisition of facts and the transmission of a more extensive body of knowledge about the past [24,25]. There is a connection here between curriculum and pedagogy, with a proposed return to school history as a 'received' subject, where teachers transmit 'knowledge' to pupils which is to be considered as authoritative, to be remembered and assimilated, as opposed to a school history which aims to develop intellectual autonomy, which provides 'a framework for pupils to discuss polemical and contentious issues within academic canons of reliability, explanation and justification' [26], and which challenges students to explore and develop their own views about challenging and complex historical issues.

A comparatively new addition to the rationale for an 'Our island story' version of school history is that it will aid social cohesion, in the increasingly multicultural and multi-ethnic Britain that has resulted from recent globalisation and migration trends. Historian Simon Schama argues that 'It's our history that binds us together as a distinctive community in an otherwise generically globalised culture' [27]. Michael Gove again provides an insight into this rationale for a return to 'traditional' school history:

There is no better way of building a modern, inclusive, patriotism than by teaching all British citizens to take pride in this country's historic achievements. Which is why the next Conservative Government will ensure the curriculum teaches the proper narrative of British History - so that every Briton can take pride in this nation [28].

This vision of school history raises a number of questions about what sort of citizen is desired, and in what ways school history might contribute to citizenship education. There are different visions of 'the good citizen'. Former Secretary of State for Education John Patten argued that public education systems should contribute to 'a willingness of persons (...) to make sacrifices for the community and to accept legitimate decisions of public officials' [29]. This ideal of the 'loyal and compliant citizen' can be contrasted with Longworth's idea of the critical and discerning citizen who would be able to 'sort out the differences between essential and non-essential information, raw fact, prejudice, half-truth and untruth, so that they know when they are being manipulated, by whom, and for what purpose' [30].

As of September 2011, the idea of teaching 'British values' is now enshrined in the regulations for initial teacher education, with the stipulation that teachers must not undermine 'fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs' [31]. Is the extent to which these values can be regarded as 'British', and considered as 'fact' to be inculcated in young people or examined against the historical record? Nor is the idea of teaching history to promote national pride without its critics (see, for example, Monbiot, 2005 [32]). The calls for a more nation-focused version of school history come at a time when the British Prime Minister has claimed that 'the doctrine of state multiculturalism has failed', and called for a more assimilationist approach in history, with (as in other countries), citizenship 'tests' for immigrants which require a knowledge of British political and constitutional history [33]. These tensions extend not just to different conceptions of citizenship, but also to different

ideas about history education; between the republican ideal of a historical education ‘in defence of the state’, and the liberal idea of a historical education as the citizen’s defence against the power and information management capabilities which the modern state possesses (see Haydn, 1999 for further development of this point [34]).

As well as the question of whether a nation-based form of school history is desirable, there is also the question of whether the vision of school history outlined by Michael Gove would be successful in improving social cohesion and reducing or eliminating the incidents of civic violence and terrorist activity that have at times scarred British society in recent years.

1.1. A Note of Caution about the Possible Dangers and Disadvantages of Returning to a Form of School History Based around Transmitting a Positive Story of the National Past

This article is not intended to be a defence of ‘The New History’. The weaknesses and flaws in the current arrangements for the teaching of history in English schools have been well documented. These weaknesses include over-reliance and meretricious use of short ‘snippets’ from sources (often termed ‘Death by sources a-f’ in the pages of *Teaching History*, the main professional journal for history teachers in England), failure to provide pupils with a coherent overview or ‘usable mental map’ of the past, a reduction in the time allocated to history in English schools, and unsatisfactory and ineffective forms of assessing pupil progress in history [35–40].

However, there are some dangers inherent in a move to restore the traditional mode of school history which was prevalent in English schools before the 1970s.

First is the assumption that a return to traditional school history, with an emphasis on ‘narrative’, and the telling of ‘Our Island Story’ will serve to increase the motivation and engagement of pupils, and the proportion of pupils who will choose to continue the study of the subject beyond the age at which the subject becomes optional [41,42]. Much is made of the fact that only 30% of pupils in England choose to continue to study history once it becomes an optional subject. However, research suggests that to a large extent, this is due to school policies on examination entries rather than pupil disengagement with the subject, with schools opting to enter less able pupils for ‘easier’ examination subjects [36,43,44]. One of the reasons for the introduction of ‘New History’ was the fact that a majority of pupils thought that the subject as taught in the 1960s and 1970s was ‘useless and boring’ [45,46]. A more recent survey of pupil attitudes to the subject suggested that a far higher proportion of pupils considered history as taught in the twenty-first century to be interesting and useful (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Pupils’ views on enjoyment of history at KS3 (11–14 year olds).

Survey and date	‘Quite enjoyable’	‘Not that enjoyable’
Schools Council Survey (1967)	41%	59%
Hargreaves Report (1984)	61%	39%
QCA Survey (2005)	69.8%	30.2%

Table 2. Pupils' views on the usefulness of history [47].

Survey and date	Useful	Not very useful
Schools Council Survey (1967)	29%	71%
Hargreaves Report (1984)	53%	47%
QCA Survey (2005)	69.3%	30.7%

Another danger in reverting to the traditional model of school history that operated in most English schools until the 1970s is that the assumption that teaching a positive story of the national past will promote social cohesion is an illusory and untested one. Research by Grever *et al.* [48] found that a majority of young people in England and the Netherlands did not agree with the suggestion that 'a common history promotes common bonds'. Martin Walker also points out that attempts to use history teaching as an instrument of socialization have proved to be ineffective in the past:

There was a European country which saw its education system as book of nation building, as a vehicle for the inculcation of national virtues, the praise of national heroism, the pride in national culture. And its government was almost ruthless in its centralization of the curriculum and in deploying education as a political weapon in the republican cause. That country was France under the Third Republic and when those national virtues were put to the test in 1940, they failed miserably [49].

In an era when students have access to alternative ways of learning about the past to a much greater degree than in the 1970s, putting forward an unproblematically positive portrayal of the national story is a dubious and probably doomed enterprise. In the words of Eric Hobsbawm [50], the promotion of national sentiment requires 'too much belief in what is patently not so.' In view of recent revelations about post-war British rule over Kenya, it seems unlikely that British citizens from Kenya can be persuaded to believe that the British Empire was a force for good. Episodes such as the Amritsar Massacre also present problems for Panglossian portrayals of the empire. Any attempt to use school history to promote particular values, for instance, Gordon Brown's suggestion that 'liberty, tolerance and fair play' are 'core values' of Britishness [51], need to be subjected to the test of evidence. A far more intellectually rigorous and robust form of school history would take on board John Slater's suggestion that school history is for the examination of such propositions, rather than their transmission [52].

The attempt to bring back a traditional canon of 'essential historical knowledge', as in the Netherlands and elsewhere [53] also runs the risk of reverting to a form of school history that is outmoded and of limited interest and relevance to young people growing up in the twenty-first century. Speaking on Radio 4, Former Chief Inspector of Schools Chris Woodhead argued that basic skills have not changed since the nineteenth century, and that it was therefore unnecessary to make the curriculum any more relevant to the twenty-first century. He declared that he was appalled that fewer than half of teenagers knew that Drake defeated the Spanish Armada (...) 'When it comes to history, surely the focus ought to be the national story and the national story hasn't changed in the last decade or so' [54]. Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove has also argued against the temptation to teach for 'relevance': 'Curriculum content should contain the classical canon of history (...). We should pull

back from seeking to make content more relevant to the contemporary concerns and lives of young people' [28].

However, there are other schools of thought on what choices should be made in terms of content selection for school history, which are not based on the 'classical' canon drawn up (and perhaps appropriate to) the late nineteenth century. It can be argued that the more important function of school history is to help pupils to understand the society and world they are living in, rather than to understand the world as it was in the past. Professor Lawrence Stenhouse, architect of the Humanities Curriculum Project which was one of the early manifestations of 'New History' argued that 'In the humanities curriculum, one selects for adolescents those topics which are of enduring human interest because of their importance to the human situation', arguing for a curriculum 'that took better account of social and economic change, and was more congruent with the needs and interests of young people' [55]. Whereas issues relating to the nation state and 'kings and queens' were clearly crucially relevant to people living in the nineteenth century, the most important issues and problems facing humanity have changed. Many of the great questions facing young people growing up at the start of the twenty-first century are supra-national rather than national [56–58]. The nation state is not the only or even the most important issue confronting young people growing up in the twenty-first century. Most of the issues that confront them and interest them are not national in nature—the environment, work, poverty, globalisation, the role of the state, sex, gender, crime, poverty, the media, culture, migration and so on. History is not national: it is about the study of the human past, not just the national one. This is reflected in post-war historical scholarship; as historian David Cannadine points out, since World War Two, 'historians of ideas, of culture, of capitalism, of technology, of population, of race, of sex, of gender and of religion were rarely concerned with specific national boundaries at all [59].

Moreover, the answer to one of history's big questions, 'How is power to be exercised in a way which contributes to human fulfilment?' [60], can no longer be answered by confining our attention to 'kings and queens'. Young people need to understand how the nature of power has changed over time, that power has drained away from hereditary monarchs, towards elected governments, and then on again to powerful transnational corporations and organisations. They need to be taught about what happened *after* people in England (and elsewhere) got the vote—a history of democracy 'Part 2'; which explores the extent to which democracy brought about the benefits which had been anticipated. To what extent has getting the vote brought about equality for women, emancipation of the working classes, social mobility and a more equal distribution of wealth and primary social goods? Young people need to know and understand 'deficits' in democracy, as well as its advantages and virtues. A backward looking, nostalgic and rose-tinted form of school history will not provide pupils with an understanding of the world in which they will grow up, nor will it be plausible and convincing, given that in a world of the Internet, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, schools are no longer the only or even the main source of information about history.

Whilst accepting the legitimacy of national identity and aspiration, Vaclav Havel argued against the sort of political ideas which in the name of nationality attempt to suppress other aspects of what he termed 'the human home', other aspects of human existence and human rights [61]. The obsession with telling positive and historically dubious stories about the national past risks rendering history

meaningless and irrelevant to young people. As we enter the Anthropocene age, school history needs to take account of these changes or pupils may see it as a quaint irrelevance [62].

Another feature of the current review of the history curriculum in England is the leading role afforded to academic historians, at the expense of history educationalists/didactics, who in a sense are regarded as ‘part of the problem’ for the perceived weaknesses of current arrangements. Michael Gove announced that a committee of ‘the greatest minds in Britain’ would be invited to design a new history curriculum, including historians Simon Schama, Andrew Roberts, Simon Sebag Montefiore and ‘a modern Macauley’, Niall Ferguson [63,64]. Academic historians’ views on the nature and form of school history have included recommendations about teaching methods as well as curriculum content; and as with content, there has been a tendency to call for a return to traditional modes of teaching. Historian Norman Stone argued that pupils should have ‘the national culture rammed down their throats’ [65]; Niall Ferguson has suggested a return to ‘rote learning’ [66] in the teaching of history, and Dr. Sheila Lawlor has questioned the move towards pupil talk as a component of history lessons (‘Why should they talk? They may have nothing to say’) [67]. However eminent these historians may be, they work at some distance from the world of the classroom, and given the amount of time that they are inevitably obliged to spend on the core business of their research, they are not necessarily best placed to comment on effective modes of teaching. These sentiments run contrary to the views of most history education professionals and most researchers in the field of pedagogy and learning, as routinely expressed in *Teaching History*, the main journal for those involved in history education.

The move towards presenting pupils with an established or defined narrative of the past, and increasing the amount of subject content and factual knowledge which needs to be covered in the history curriculum also risks reversing the gains which have been made in developing pupils’ understanding of history as a form of knowledge, with its rules, procedures and conventions for ascertaining the validity of claims; a useful skill in a society that has become increasingly sophisticated in terms of manipulating and distorting information. It could be argued that the world would be better served if school history was to be used to protect citizens against their own state rather than using it to secure allegiance against other states. (How many people reading this article would completely trust their government to tell them the complete truth about all matters of state?) School history can be used to help young people to develop an awareness of loyalties and obligations to bodies other than the state, and of the tensions that can sometimes arise between the interests of the state and other communities. Thomson points to the many examples of how ‘easily led’ populations have been, adding that ‘we may now claim to be more sophisticated and less easily manipulated than our ancestors, but there is little evidence of this... from the Crusades, Napoleon, Hitler, Kennedy or Yeltsin, the ability to deploy propaganda has been one of the main determinants of historical direction’ [68]. The high proportion of Americans who believe that the world is only 4000 years old, that Saddam Hussein was behind the 9/11 attacks, and that climate change is a fiction is testimony for the potential of history to be ‘Disneyfied, sentimentalised and whitewashed’ in a worrying and dangerous way [69].

The desired nature and form of school history depends on what sort of citizens the state wants to cultivate. In today’s world, is it better to have citizens who are loyal, compliant and credulous, or citizens who are discerning in their ability to handle information intelligently, and who have been educated to be constructively critical in evaluating the reliability and authority of what they are told, by politicians, the media, the internet or even historians? John Slater argues that properly taught, and

freed from the constraints of promoting national pride, school history ‘not only helps us to understand the identity of our communities, cultures, nations, by knowing something of their past, but also enables our loyalties to them to be moderated by informed and responsible scepticism’ [52]. Slater claims that historical thinking is primarily ‘mind-opening, not socialising’ [52], arguing that in a healthy democracy, school history should be to at least some extent about developing pupils’ intellectual autonomy, rather than ‘telling them what to think’. This point is also made by John Rae:

It is not a school’s task to produce good citizens any more than it is to produce Christian gentlemen. The school does not give people their political ideals or religious faith but the means to discover both for themselves. Above all, it gives them the scepticism to doubt, rather than the inclination to believe. In this sense, a good school is subversive of current orthodoxy in politics, religion and learning. Of course, by placing the emphasis on radical independence of mind, we run the risk of producing, for example, an intelligent traitor rather than a stupid patriot. But the risk of failing is much greater because the result may be a sham democracy in which citizens do not have the independence to participate [70].

The past decade has seen an unhelpful polarisation of views about how and why history should be taught in English schools, but there have been voices calling for a balance between the calls for a return to the transmission of a body of knowledge about the national past, and the development of pupils’ understanding of history as a form of knowledge:

Much is made of teachers focusing on the development of historical skills at the expense of what should be their proper concern; the imparting of historical knowledge. Too often the discussion has been too strident and ill-informed. But there are issues about getting the balance right; about ensuring that pupils have a secure grasp of events, without being over-loaded; that they are able to use the knowledge they have, and that they do not spend their time on mechanical tasks rehearsing formulaic responses to snippets from sources [71].

One further point might be mentioned, and that is the often neglected question of the moral and ethical dimensions of studying history. There are many people who have been very successful in their study of history in schools, who have degree level qualifications in the subject, who understand perfectly well how to read the record of the past, and who have an assured grasp of the rules and conventions governing the use of evidence to ascertain the validity of truth claims, and who nonetheless exercise the skills which they have acquired in distorting and manipulating the evidence for personal, financial or political ends.

In terms of ‘what would make the world a better place’, one of the most important facets of school history which might be addressed by the review of the National Curriculum for history is this often neglected element of studying history in schools (and it is a ‘disposition’ rather than a ‘skill’): the importance of respect for evidence, and open-mindedness in considering the evidence available. In the words of former Conservative Secretary of State for Education, Keith Joseph:

The complicated interplay of evidence which is itself not certain and subject to interpretation gives history a particularly valuable part in the development of an adult understanding. It helps pupils to understand that there is a range of questions—be they political, economic, social or cultural—on which there is no single right answer, where opinions have to be tolerated but need to be subjected to the test of evidence and argument.

As the pupil progresses in this encounter with history, he should be helped to acquire a sense of the necessity for personal judgements in the light of facts—recognising that the facts often be far from easy to establish and far from conclusive. And it should equally awaken a recognition of the possible legitimacy of other points of view. In other words, it seems to be that the teaching of history has to take place in a spirit which takes seriously the need to pursue truth on the basis of evidence, and at the same time accepts the need for give and take in that pursuit and that teaching in that spirit should encourage pupils to take a similar approach [72].

2. Conclusions

The advent of ‘New History’ in English schools in the decades since the 1970s has brought ‘mixed blessings’. In some respects it has had positive outcomes: a much smaller proportion of pupils studying the subject regard history as ‘boring and useless’, pupils acquire a broader range of skills, competences, and understanding compared to the period when examinations were based almost entirely on factual recall and essay writing, and it could be argued that pupils learn about a broader range of the human past than was the case when syllabuses were almost entirely limited to political and constitutional history.

However, there are several important issues which need to be addressed in the current review of the history curriculum in English schools. Perhaps the most important of these is pupil entitlement to a historical education. The present system, whereby pupils can stop studying history at the age of 13, and where pupils from more affluent backgrounds receive a much more extensive historical education than those from poorer backgrounds is difficult to defend in a political system where all young people will have the right to vote and to exercise their choices and preferences as citizens [36]. The fragmentary, disjointed and unbalanced nature of the current subject content within the history curriculum, which leaves pupils without a coherent ‘mental map’ of the past [40,73] also needs to be addressed. The sometimes inchoate and vague approach to the development of pupils’ ‘historical skills’ also needs to be considered. Work on ‘skills’ has often lacked rigour and clarity and has been included at the expense of the much more important goal of developing pupils’ historical understanding. As Peter Lee has pointed out, ‘It’s not about skills but understanding and there is only a loose link between skills and understanding’ [74]. Both the current system of ‘levels’ of attainment in history, and the format of the GCSE examination at 16 need to be radically reformed (or even abolished). Not only are there major reservations within the profession about the ‘levels’ system, and the GCSE exam [35,37]. In practice they both lead to the practice of ‘coaching rather than teaching’ [75] and ‘teaching to the test’. Finally, some thought needs to be given to getting pupils to understand the ethical and moral implications of ‘doing history’, in terms of grasping the importance of veracity and ‘objectivity of procedure’ [52].

There is a danger that curriculum reform driven by politicians, government selected academic historians and right-wing think-tanks, combined with the exclusion or marginalisation of history education professionals (history teachers and history teacher educators) may be overly influenced by ideological concerns, and may fail to consider some of the practical considerations which influence the effectiveness and appropriateness of the history curriculum (for example, how much content it is

possible to fit into the curriculum time available, how to motivate and engage pupils with the subject, which teaching approaches are most effective). There is also no question that in attempting to ‘put the clock back’ to traditional curriculum content and teaching approaches, England is moving in the opposite direction to the rest of the developed world. In the words of Gerard Kelly, ‘Just as England’s government is foisting dead poets, dead monarchs and dead languages on pupils, so the Asian countries it is keen to emulate are busy heading in the opposite direction—stressing the soft skills and off-piste learning undervalued here’ [76].

A reform of the history curriculum which attempts to revert to basing school history around the idea of transmitting a positive and defined story about the national past, using teacher exposition, rote learning and memorisation as the main teaching approach, may well do more harm than good. A history curriculum which focuses primarily on ‘kings and queens’, ‘Our Island Story’ and (in the words of Richard Evans) ‘The wonderfulness of us’ [77] as a nation, may not be in the best interests of those on whom it is inflicted.

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