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Splitting hairs as our past disappears quietly

Rather than worrying how history is taught, the government must first worry that it is taught at all — and not just as a bit part subject

Amanda Foreman Published: 6 November 2011



Simon Schama has been chosen to lead a review of history in the national syllabus (Jon Enoch)

The teaching of history in schools has become one of the great fault lines in society. It has joined the

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reason and only the fanatics left standing.

The outrage at the appointment of the historian Simon Schama to lead the Department for Education's review of history in the national syllabus is far out of proportion to his role. "We don't want curriculum design by celebrities," snapped the chairman of the Royal Historical Society's teaching and learning committee, even though the review is a sophisticated public consultation that will take until 2014.

Phase one, already under way, is merely an invitation to all interested parties, including parents, to submit their views to the department on six key questions, ranging from whether history should be compulsory to what is the best way to teach the sequence of events. But this seemingly sensible approach to a complicated issue has not assuaged the critics who equate the attempt to create a national history curriculum with government-sponsored mind control. The distinguished professor of Scottish history Tom Devine declared earlier this year, "I am root-and-branch opposed to [Michael] Gove's approach. It smells of Whiggery; of history as chauvinism."

The great tragedy is that the heat generated by the history-as-propaganda debate threatens to overwhelm every other issue. Britain, and only Britain, suffers from cultural cringe to such an extent that any national discussion on how to teach "our island story" immediately leads to thinly veiled accusations of racism. Something has clearly gone awry if, as a recent debate between historians in the London Review of Books demonstrated, it is deemed controversial to teach children that Wellington won the battle of Waterloo. History classes in the United States, by contrast, have no trouble claiming that Washington won the decisive battle of Yorktown, even though half his army was made up of French troops.

There is no federally mandated history curriculum in the United States. Education is decided by each state, leading to some interesting divergences. What unites the country is a shared belief in the value of teaching American history. In New York, one of the most ethnically diverse states, the law decrees that all schools must include in their history curriculum courses on "patriotism, citizenship and human rights". The curriculum is an inspiring document. From the age of 13, two years are devoted to a chronological sequence of world history; thereafter pupils study all aspects of American history. California follows a similar line.

The evidence from America suggests that learning the national story as part of a wider exercise in understanding their national identity hasn't had any demonstrable ill effects on the children.

By all accounts it should be safe to assume that British children could also be exposed to a national narrative without it turning them into jingoists.

Unfortunately, America also illustrates another, and by far the most desperate, aspect of the history debate. In spite of all the carefully formulated curriculums, the discipline is falling into terminal decline. A recent check on American pupils by the National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed a shocking level of ignorance.

Only 9% of 10-year-olds could identify a picture of Abraham Lincoln and give two reasons why he was important. It takes only five minutes of listening to the Republican presidential hopeful Michele Bachmann to realise that it isn't just children who have been cast adrift into a deracinated and

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The malignant situation in America is ample proof that the curriculum itself is not the reason behind that country's malaise of mass ignorance, or why two-thirds of children drop history at 14 in the UK. The truth is, history is facing an existential challenge.

As the historian Linda Colley has pointed out, the most important reform that the government can make is to ensure history is not reduced in schools to a bit part in something called social studies or humanities. The most enlightened curriculum will not make a difference if — as is already the case in the US — the majority of pupils receive just an hour of instruction a week in a class that is generally history-related.

Colley has suggested making history compulsory to the age of 16. There are good arguments for extending it even further. The real choice is not whether to favour teaching narrative over teaching historical skills, or the victims over the victors, but whether to give the subject its proper weight in the syllabus. The Duke of Wellington or Duke Ellington — it's immaterial without the promise of time and resources.

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