

Australia: New school curriculum to promote war and nationalism

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The Liberal-National government has announced a “review” of the national school curriculum. Education Minister Christopher Pyne declared that revising the history syllabus would ensure that more “prominence” was given to Anzac Day, the public holiday that initially commemorated those killed in the World War I Gallipoli campaign but which has been promoted by successive Labor and Liberal governments as a rallying point for the promotion of war and militarism.

Pyne added that he wants the curriculum “to celebrate Australia.” The education minister previously complained that the January 26 Australia Day public holiday, marking the 1788 beginning of British colonisation, was not taught in schools until Year 3 (eight- and nine-year-olds).

The move to glorify past wars in schools across the country forms part of the government’s preparation for a new series of wars. Tony Abbott’s government is continuing where the former Labor government left off in integrating Australia into the Obama administration’s aggressive “pivot to Asia” that aims to militarily encircle China to maintain Washington’s domination over the Asia-Pacific region. The Australian military has been involved in nearly every US-initiated war of aggression since the launching of the so-called war on terror, and it is now actively involved in Washington’s advanced strategic plans to wage a war against China.

These military preparations have been accompanied by highly conscious ideological preparations for war, aimed at breaking down the deeply rooted anti-militarist traditions within the Australian working class and among young people. The upcoming centenary “celebrations” of World War I is a particularly striking example of the effort to promote predatory and bloody conflagrations as noble campaigns for “democracy”

and “human rights” (see: “Australian government plans to celebrate World War I”).

Pyne has announced that the curriculum review will report to the government by the middle of the year, with changes to the school agenda introduced for 2015. Kenneth Wiltshire, a professor at the University of Queensland Business School, and Kevin Donnelly, an ex-Liberal Party staffer and long time associate of various right-wing think tanks, will head the review.

Donnelly’s appointment is especially revealing about the government’s intentions. In March 2003 he authored an opinion piece in the *Age* denouncing school teachers for opposing the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq. He castigated them for not teaching students to “congratulate members of the Australian Defence Force for putting their lives at risk or thank the ‘coalition of the willing’ for seeking to overthrow a dictator and bring freedom to an oppressed people.”

Both Donnelly and Pyne have long demanded that the curriculum champion Australia’s so-called “Judeo-Christian heritage.” This includes covering up and whitewashing the brutal history of Britain’s colonisation of Australia and the destruction of Aboriginal society. The education minister has insisted the government does not agree with a “black armband view” of Australian history. When the national curriculum was first released in 2010, Pyne complained that “grade nines will consider the personal stories of Aboriginal people and examine massacres and ‘indigenous displacement,’ without any reference to the benefit to our country of our European heritage and the sacrifice of our forebears to build a nation.”

Last Friday, Pyne declared that “certainly we need to know that the treatment of indigenous Australians by the early colonists, right through to the current time, has not always been as good as it should have been.”

This denial of the genocide and dispossession of Aborigines that accompanied the establishment of Australia as a capitalist state was accompanied by the insistence that “there should be just as much concentration on the benefits of Western civilisation in the history curriculum, as there should be on the truth about the way we treated indigenous Australians for the last 200 years.”

Every aspect of the curriculum review involves the promotion of reactionary politics.

Pyne and Donnelly have indicated their intention to include anti-communism in what is taught in schools. The education minister previously complained that the drafting of the history curriculum involved University of Melbourne Professor Stuart Macintyre, who he described as an “ex-communist.” Pyne also denounced the history syllabus for focussing too much on the role of the trade unions in Australia’s past, and not sufficiently promoting corporate figures. In 2010, Donnelly complained that under the national curriculum “one doubts whether students will learn about the failure of socialism as an economic system [or] the success of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in staring down totalitarian regimes.”

Donnelly has also declared that religion is not taught properly in the country’s “very secular curriculum.”

The opposition Labor Party has called on Pyne to desist from “politicising” the curriculum with his “partisan” appointment of Donnelly as review head. However, Labor has no differences with the central agenda behind the review—the promotion of nationalism and war. When the former Labor government introduced the national syllabus in 2010, for the first time supplanting the separate state curriculums, then education minister Peter Garrett boasted that he had ensured that studying Australia Day was made compulsory.

Labor’s national curriculum was part of the pro-business “education revolution” promoted by prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard that aimed to further undermine the public education system in favour of private schools and meet corporate demands for a more productive and literate workforce through the new NAPLAN standardised testing regime. Now the Abbott government is going further. Pyne has said that one aspect of the review will be to place even more emphasis on literacy and numeracy, which will

undermine the teaching of subjects deemed “non-productive,” including arts and music.

The government’s review has been widely denounced by education experts. Nearly 200 academics and educationalists signed an open letter to Pyne, noting the timing of the revised curriculum would have “disruptive consequences for students and teachers.” Former head of the New South Wales education department Ken Boston told the Australian ABC that Donnelly was a “polemicist” who “doesn’t engage with reasoned argument or evidence ... [his] publications are regarded as specious nonsense.”



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