

Australian education minister demands militarist school curriculum

Patrick Kelly
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Federal education minister Alan Tudge has denounced proposed modifications to the national school curriculum, on the basis they failed to promote sufficient “love” for Australia, reverence for “sacred” Anzac Day commemorations, and encouragement for young people to join the military and fight in the event of war.

Australia’s national school curriculum is reviewed every six years by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). ACARA is a statutory body established by federal and state education ministers. A final draft of the curriculum is expected to be approved by these ministers later this year.

Tudge has previously issued various complaints about the draft curriculum. These have largely consisted of long standing right-wing education hobby horses—demanding “higher standards,” more phonics in early literacy learning, etc. His remarks this week, however, point to the most important agenda behind the government’s attempted refashioning of the curriculum—the promotion of militarism and war.

Speaking on Triple J radio’s “Hack” programme, the education minister declared: “Students need to have an understanding of why it is that almost uniquely in the history of the world, Australia is such a wealthy, liberal, free, egalitarian society. What has created that? Because if you [don’t] understand that deeply, then you’re not going to protect it, as a million Australians have through their military service, and 100,000 people have died in the protection of those things, into defending them. That’s what I want to see particularly embedded in the national curriculum, which I’m not convinced is enough just yet.”

In other words, children must have Australian nationalist and exceptionalist myths drilled into them so that as young adults they are ready to fight and die “defending” the nation against foreign enemies.

The profoundly anti-democratic nature of the government’s ideological offensive was underscored by Tudge’s remarks about Anzac Day, the April 25 annual public holiday that marks the beginning of one of the bloodiest campaigns during World War I, the assault on Gallipoli, Turkey.

“Instead of Anzac Day being presented as the most sacred of all days in Australia,” Tudge complained, “where we stop, we reflect, we commemorate the 100,000 people who have died for our freedoms—instead it’s presented as a contested idea, right? Anzac Day is not a contested idea, apart from an absolute fringe element in our society. So, that’s just one example. The word ‘contested’

itself is used nineteen times throughout the curriculum, i.e., it’s asking people to, instead of just accepting these for the things which they are, such as Anzac Day, to really challenge them and to contest them.”

This is nothing less than a fascistic conception of education. School teachers are being asked to ensure that children and young adults are trained to simply “accept things as they are” with regard to critical ideological nostrums. These include the mythology around Anzac Day, such as the bogus claim that those killed in imperialist wars died “for our freedoms.”

Any critical questioning and discussion of Australian imperialism’s dirty record of global warfare is illegitimate, and, by implication, treasonous.

The latest draft of the national curriculum issued by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority is a thoroughly conventional document, with its history section in line with mainstream establishment narratives of the founding and development of the Australian capitalist state. The offending passage on Anzac Day merely related to the proposal to cover, as part of Year 9 history, “the commemoration of World War I, including different historical interpretations and contested debates about the nature and significance of the Anzac legend and the war.”

Against this, the federal minister insists that school children must be taught that Anzac day is the “most sacred of all days.”

This has nothing to do with learning history. The drive to define Anzac Day as “sacred” (defined by the OED as “connected with God or a god, or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration”) aims at enshrining militarism as a de facto state religion.

Moreover, Tudge’s claim that Anzac Day is not “a contested idea, apart from an absolute fringe element” represents right-wing historical falsification. From its origins in 1915-16, Anzac Day has in fact *always* been a contested matter in Australia’s history.

Research by the University of Queensland’s Mark Cryle, for example, documented that by 1917, amid escalating anti-war and anti-capitalist sentiment in the working class, “a significant portion of the population felt alienated from Anzac Day events. Far from being a unifying force, Anzac Day had increasingly become a political instrument in the hands of a sectional interest—loyalist pro-conscription conservatives who promoted the war effort at the expense of all else.” (This and subsequent quotes are from Cryle’s 2015 PhD thesis, “Making ‘the One Day of the Year’: a

Genealogy of Anzac Day to 1918.”)

In 1916 and 1917, the population twice voted down government efforts to impose conscription. Strongly influenced by the revolutionary movement in Russia in 1917, Australian workers were moving sharply to the left. In August and September, a general strike triggered by railway workers in New South Wales shut down industries across the country.

Cryle noted that in 1916-1918 many working class communities boycotted Anzac Day ceremonies, and staged separate, low key commemorations for family members and colleagues killed in the war. Meanwhile the official events “provid[ed] an outlet for the rhetoric of loyalist pro-war conservatives increasingly embittered by the defeat of the conscription plebiscites in 1916 and 1917 and the virtual collapse of voluntary recruiting. [...] By 1918 Anzac Day’s future was far from secured. It may well have gone the way of Wattle Day and Empire Day—consigned to footnotes in the nation’s history.”

It was only in 1927 that the day was observed by all the states, and only by the mid-1930s that consistent rituals were developed (dawn services, marches, etc.). In the 1950s and ’60s attendances at public events were dwindling, especially for young people, who increasingly saw Anzac Day as the property of the pro-war, racist leadership of the Returned and Services League (RSL). There were predictions that the event would, with time, die out.

A major shift occurred with the 75th anniversary of the Gallipoli landing, in 1990. The Labor government of Bob Hawke spent considerable resources developing the anniversary as a state-sponsored extravaganza. Hawke travelled to Turkey, and was the first prime minister to mark the day from Gallipoli, joined by numerous foreign dignitaries and thousands of veterans who were provided with publicly funded trips to the event. This all contrasted with the 50th anniversary ceremony held 25 years earlier, when no senior Australian government officials and only a small number of self-funded veterans travelled to Gallipoli.

The shift was driven by the emergence of US-led militarism amid the terminal crisis of Soviet Stalinism. Hawke’s appearance at Gallipoli came just three months before his government joined the US-led Operation Desert Storm against Iraq.

The 1990-91 war against Iraq was followed by the US-led military intervention into Somalia in 1993-95, the Balkans War of 1998-99, the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the 2011 NATO war and regime change operation in Libya. Australian governments, Labor and Liberal alike, supported every one of these criminal operations. The Anzac myth grew in tandem with the eruption of militarism and war.

The Howard Liberal-National government (1996-2007) picked up where its Labor predecessor had left off, and paid particular attention to the promotion of Anzac Day in schools. The Rudd-Gillard Labor governments (2007-2013) likewise promoted Anzac Day—in 2012 Prime Minister Julia Gillard asserted that the Australian state had been founded at Gallipoli, with the country’s “spirit and ethos” determined there.

Degrading new heights were reached in 2014-15, the centenary of the world war and the Gallipoli campaign. The federal government of Tony Abbott and Labor and Liberal state governments spent more than \$300 million on the 1914

centenary—at least twice that spent by Britain and other countries involved in the world war. The 2015 Gallipoli centenary likewise involved a barrage of government and media propaganda, as well as a vulgar “Camp Gallipoli” corporate-sponsored event organised in the manner of a rock concert.

Several witch-hunts were orchestrated against anyone challenging the militarist-soaked official rhetoric. The SBS (Special Broadcasting Corporation) public broadcaster sacked its sports journalist Scott McIntyre for posting five tweets expressing an anti-war stance and opposing the glorification of the Gallipoli invasion and World War I. The Socialist Equality Party had to defeat censorship efforts in order to hold anti-war public meetings in April 2015, after the University of Sydney and Burwood Council cancelled venue bookings at the behest of extreme right-wing forces.

Tudge’s latest campaign promoting Anzac militarism signals an escalation of the drive to falsify history and indoctrinate young people.

The education minister’s outburst can only be understood in the context of Canberra’s active preparations to join a US-led war of aggression against China. The American foreign policy and military establishment, humiliated by the precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan, is determined to focus its fire on “great power rivalries,” above all targeting China. With Australia’s US-utilised intelligence and military bases on the front lines, the country’s ruling elite is seeking to condition the population for war.

The entire working class—and especially teachers and young people in schools and universities—must oppose the federal government’s promotion of historical falsification and nationalist-militarist propaganda. This is a vital component of the building of a new anti-war movement that is required to prevent the catastrophe that would follow the eruption of another world war.



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