

Correction, Minister: democracy's roots are neither Christian nor Western



A little less confrontation in our history? Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge.

By Frank Bongiorno
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John Podsnap is one of Charles Dickens' minor characters. Mr Podsnap, we learn in *Our Mutual Friend*, "was well to do, and stood very high in Mr Podsnap's opinion". He "was quite satisfied" and "never could make out why everybody was not quite satisfied". "We Englishmen are Very Proud of our Constitution, Sir," Mr Podsnap tells a "foreign gentleman". "It Was Bestowed Upon Us By Providence. No Other Country is so Favoured as This Country."

The federal Education Minister, Alan Tudge, is similarly quite satisfied with his country. But his complaint that the new draft national curriculum in history is too "woke" in not saying enough positive things about Anzac, Christianity and liberal democracy is meeting resistance from Labor state and territory education ministers.

"We should expect young Australians leaving school to understand how our nation is one of the most free, wealthy, tolerant and egalitarian societies in all of human history," Tudge recently told the Centre for Independent Studies, a right-wing think tank. "Ultimately, students should leave school with a love of country and a sense of optimism and hope that we live in the greatest country on Earth and that the future is bright."

Most historians of my acquaintance have responded to Tudge's effort to revive the history wars with a gigantic yawn. Even if you feel it's a stretch to see him as Mr Podsnap 2.0, the echoes of Howard-era history wars have been hard to miss. Tudge's innovation has been to bring an unusual clumsiness to the effort.

A striking characteristic of the Howard and Rudd-era debates was a dawning recognition that when we talk about history, we are not just talking about Australian history. The Australian Curriculum that emerged was one that sought a world perspective. Australian history had a special place in it, but national experience had a broader global context. This provides a stark contrast with my own school history education, which managed to omit both continental Europe and Asia.

Thinking about history has moved on since my time at school in the 1970s and 1980s, and since early this century. Historians now experiment with different scales, both space and time. Deep History reminds us that the history of humanity did not begin a few thousand years ago. Australia, with a human history stretching back 50 or 60 millennia, necessarily has an important part to play in this rethinking.

Big History, pioneered by another historian in Australia, David Christian, goes further. It is history understood as beginning with the Big Bang and extending until the end of the universe. It will not be everyone's cup of tea, but it challenges us to think about how we imagine time, space, change and humanity.

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In a landscape inhabited by such thinking and teaching, you might begin to understand why Tudge's injunction to teachers to tell cheery stories about Anzacs has been of somewhat limited interest. He is not even speaking in a language fully comprehensible to anyone familiar with what it is to offer history education today.

History recognises distinctions between fact and fallacy. Tudge tells us he wants history teaching that "recognises our democracy is based on our Christian and Western origins, with a reference to the importance of the values of patriotism and freedom". Any well-educated history student would know that in the first part he is simply wrong. The origins of democracy lie in classical and pagan Greece, not Christianity or the West, both later inventions. In the second part, he offers his opinions and, as he says, his values, but not historical understanding.

The great historian of Tudor England, Sir Geoffrey Elton, thought history was too complicated for children and could not be undertaken seriously before university. It is not a view I share but, as I get older, I see more sense in his argument than I did when I first encountered it as a university student.

History is indeed a complex and difficult study. There is a reason why historians, unlike practitioners in many other fields, tend to do their best work in middle or even old age. It is helped by life experience, by long and careful observation of the world, and not only by doing hard yards among books, journals and documents.



Symbol of democracy ... the Parthenon, Acropolis, in Athens, A temple dedicated to the ancient Greek goddess Athena, it was built in 432BC - before the West was an idea.

It is a form of inquiry with evolving techniques and rules that can be taught and learnt in schools and universities. It demands a capacity for cool appraisal. But it is also, as the Australian historian of the Pacific Greg Dening said, a humane and cultured form of inquiry in which we express something of ourselves. That's all pretty complicated.

Tudge's idea of history, by way of contrast, is a poor basis for education in the subject. State education ministers and history teachers should have nothing to do with a curriculum based on such a misunderstanding of what history is for and why it matters.

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