

Why Alan Tudge is now on the history warpath

By Naomi Barnes

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Australian children will never defend the country if the draft history curriculum is adopted. That's the takeaway from the Federal Education Minister Allan Tudge's speech to the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) on Friday.

The minister called for yet another curriculum reform to ensure "a positive, optimistic view of Australian history".

His reasoning? "Individual students learn to understand the origins of our liberal democracy so that they can defend it, they can protect it, they can understand it, and they can celebrate it".

The impact of such talk on the education system is cause for concern. Curriculum reform is expensive for the economy and disruptive for the sector. Tudge's comments are unusual given the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA) just completed a public deliberation over the History curriculum earlier this year.



*This begs the question:
What the hell is the Minister doing?*

It's about the election but there is something more. The use of two political spaces, Sky News and the libertarian think tank Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), rather than the more bipartisan National Press Club, supports the campaigning thesis. My previous research has shown CIS and the Institute for Public Affairs have a specific focus on causing education issues to go viral. When an issue goes viral, it becomes something talked about in more households and more online accounts, whether challenged or accepted. As the lobbyist theory goes, more viral = more likely to have popular influence. Add to this Tudge's online blocking of multiple historians and teachers of history over the past weeks, as they question his weird focus on optimism, a clearer picture emerges. This commentary is not about policy. It is about the election and getting that little word "optimism" associated with the Coalition.

It's probably electioneering

There is a federal election on the horizon, and even if the Government is re-elected, there will be a cabinet reshuffle. So why is Tudge making so much noise about History education when he only has five months left in the job? I believe the imminent election is the key to unlocking Friday's weird flex.

It is tempting to look at the transcripts from Tudge's comments and dismiss them as far-fetched. But it is more important to draw back the lens to view a government with an election in five months, after a pandemic year filled with bad press.

When taking a broad view of the Federal government, it is interesting to note that the word "optimism" is popping up in many Federal press releases and media interviews. Minister for Health and Aged Care, Greg Hunt, has been using the word consistently since COVID19 vaccines were developed, but the word has also crept into other portfolios. Prime Minister Scott Morrison is the "man for optimistic narratives", Treasurer Josh Frydenberg is optimistic of an economic recovery, Trade and Tourism Minister Dan Tehan is optimistic about resolving the French submarine diplomatic disaster, "government sources" from Attorney General Michaelia Cash's office say they are cautiously optimistic about resolving the industrial relations bill, and Foreign Minister Marise Payne even has "optimism" in her Twitter profile, even if it is about breeding racehorses.

Optimism has popped up enough times to warrant attention. The word taps into a public desire for something good to happen after the heartbreak and restrictions of the COVID 19 pandemic. We also know that the current federal government is very keen to ensure popular optics. "Optimism" is a useful word for dismissing the Opposition's criticism of the Government at the same time giving hope to the population. It's a powerful word that escapes a lot of generalised attention, and does a lot of political heavy lifting.

How “optimism” works in History education

The tactics of this current government’s History education rhetoric is different to the Howard government. The History Wars have a few skirmishes every time there are announcements about education’s role in the development of the nation. While Ministers and their lobbyists clutch pearls over declining scores in literacy and numeracy, and students are squeezed into STEM for the economy, History has always been about what type of nation Australia’s children should be actively informed about. In the past, this battle for the soul of the nation has at least had some semblance of debate, with academics, historians and politicians getting into the nitty gritty of what it means to raise active and informed citizens. They have engaged with alternative readings of events, even if only to dismiss them.

Tudge’s History War is different.

Tudge’s reasoning is riddled with misinformation and weird predictions but he keeps coming back to this word “optimism”. While he drags out the History Wars’ bread and butter about balancing the positive things Australia has done alongside the violence of the colonial past, his desire to squeeze in the use of “optimism” in other ways looks more forced.

For example, as mentioned previously, the review of the Australian Curriculum was just completed in July. It was not until *after* the Australian public were invited to make submissions on the proposed changes to school offerings that Tudge began to get quite vocal about changing it. Which leads me to wonder, if he really wanted to make the curriculum more optimistic, why didn’t he begin this campaign before the review ended. A closer look at his reasoning shows that some of the items in the History curriculum he thought were pessimistic have already been removed in the latest draft. So why did he think they were worth talking about?

He uses old news to argue that if the draft curriculum goes forward, students “won’t necessarily defend our democracy as previous generations have done” using data from the Lowry Institute to support his claim. Apart from being completely impossible to make that prediction, what Tudge doesn’t say is that the Lowry Institute poll on democracy shows young people’s faith in democracy is on the rise, trending up from 31% of the population believing in democracy in 2012, to 60% in 2021. So using Tudge’s logic, the current History curriculum is doing exactly what it is supposed to do.

But by flipping a 60% win to a 40% deficit, Tudge can politik about the *need* for optimism.

These are tactics, not ANOTHER education reform strategy

This points to education *tactically* being used to further the Federal Government's re-election campaign, rather than a strategic move to save the soul of the nation. Tactics are localised responses to circumstances, whereas strategies are more stabilised and long term. So in other words, the federal cabinet ministers are finding issues to associate with the word "optimism" and putting it in front of as many voters as possible. For education, the History Wars have a *history* of going viral, even before the internet. And if you look at Tudge's comments on Friday, the History curriculum is nestled in with the other two big viral topics – literacy and numeracy test scores.

Ultimately, education cannot continue to be used by politicians this way. Education researchers and journalists need to work hard on holding these tactics up to the Australian public and pushing back on the use of words like "optimism". While researching for this article, it became increasingly noticeable that the media has begun to use the word to describe the Government. And it's not just the Murdoch press. Every time a journalist associates that word with the Federal Government, they are giving them free political advertising.

This is just another electioneering policy announcement where Federal politicians have called for a review of the Australian Curriculum: History declaring the hearts and minds of Australia's youth as under threat. This same rhetoric was used in the 1990s when Henry Reynolds and Keith Windschuttle faced off over the "black armband view of Australian history" in the proposed national curriculum. We need to start asking *why* this government sees the need to renew the History Wars while still pointing out the misinformation in their rhetoric.

Education researchers need to look hard at their expert subjects and then pan out to see if they are simply being used as a pawn in a wider federal agenda. Education has been in a state of flux for many years now and this requires research that pre-empt, just as much as it reacts. That involves looking wider than the education portfolio. If we look outside of our silos, there's some clues about where we are going.

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