

# The grab for power

The federal government's latest intrusion into curriculum development and delivery marks a disturbing trend. **PAUL SOMERVILLE** reports.

**A**fter years of sniping about what's taught in schools, the federal government finally revealed its hand last month with education minister Julie Bishop proposing a national board to control school curriculum.

The proposal was immediately condemned by the states, the opposition and the AEU as a power grab.

Meanwhile, at the recent Australian History summit—from which teachers were largely excluded—the federal government continued its criticisms of current teaching practice. Describing classroom history teaching as “fragmented stew”, the Prime Minister John Howard and Education Minister Julie Bishop have recommended a return to a 1950s-style of ‘structured narrative’ and ‘key facts’, with history taught as a stand-alone subject up to Year 10. In a move which has outraged educators across the country, the government is also proposing to tie federal funding to compliance.

The government's targeting of history curriculum and delivery follows similar attacks on senior English, science, physical education and religious studies. Media rumblings suggest that geography will be next.

Alan Reid, professor of education at the University of South Australia, is highly critical of the government's motivation and methods. “The federal government is cherry-picking disparate areas of curricula and making assertions about the

extent to which they are not adequately dealt with by the states,” he says. “Then it's seeking to impose ill-thought-out solutions while threatening to withdraw funding.”

According to Reid, the proposed interventions are educationally incoherent and lack sound rationale. In his view, they reflect the federal government's wish to exert power and influence over the states and to promote its conservative ideology.

“Rather than celebrating the considerable achievements in education—and in all of the benchmark studies Australia is at the top end—the government is playing a populist blame game. Having no responsibility for schools, they can easily make accusations... without being accountable for educational outcomes,” he says.

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## Lacking classroom reality

AEU federal president Pat Byrne regards the government's recent activities as yet another attack on public education. “It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the federal government is manufacturing a crisis in public schools to encourage parents to buy into its ‘choice’ mantra and send their children to private schools,” she says. “The constant attack on state and territory governments reinforces the impression that the problems are with state schools, despite the fact

that curricula are similar across both public and private sectors.”

The absence of consultation with teachers and the lack of respect for their professional knowledge are especially disturbing, she says.

“Politicians, supported by elements of the media, pontificate on what should be taught, in a manner that is openly critical of teachers in classrooms. But the proponents have little or no idea of the reality of classroom practice in 2006,” says Byrne.

While debate about curriculum is welcome, teachers seek a considered discussion that respects their expertise, Byrne says. She encourages teachers to speak out and not be intimidated by the debate.

## Flying the flag

History Teachers' Association president Nick Ewbank attended the summit. “We were heard respectfully and our views were given full weighting,” he says, noting that, after complaints were made, the number of teachers present was increased from two to three out of a total of 23 participants.

Nonetheless, Ewbank has concerns about the federal government “pushing the limits” of the Constitution through greater intervention in education.

“To be honest, I can't see what difference flying the flag out the front of the school makes to the quality of the education taught inside,” he says. ●

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