

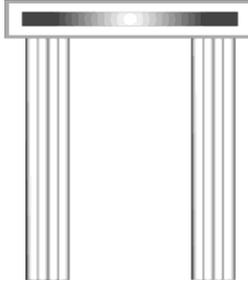


Robert Tombs
with
Abby Waldman
Christopher Moule

Lessons from History
Freedom, Aspiration and the
New Curriculum

Curriculum Series
Edited by
Sheila Lawlor

A FORUM FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC THINKING



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Politeia's Curriculum Series: General Introduction

Sheila Lawlor

The consequences of the state's intervention in the school curriculum in England over the past three decades have not been happy. Standards have fallen in the international tables;¹ education officials and advisers have played an over-dominant role in deciding what is taught and how it is examined; teachers have been left without professional freedom in the classroom.

The levels at which standards are officially pitched, across the whole range of subjects, are generally low in comparison to those of similar countries. Low attainers suffer especially. Many pupils leave school inadequately educated or prepared for life, some without the basic teaching needed for professional advancement. One result is the high proportion of school leavers without a job, and not continuing education or training. And for the brighter pupils, the evidence is that they now can be disadvantaged when applying for university against applicants from the EU, where school leaving standards are higher than at our A-level.²

At Politeia, education has been central to our policy programme, especially the *Comparing Standards* series, which analysed academic and vocational standards for 16-19 year olds across a number of similar western economies, and concluded that school leaving standards in central subjects are pitched lower here than in most of the comparator systems.³ Politeia's new curriculum series will consider a variety of subjects taught at school with the aim of analysing the problems in the present arrangements and proposing the principles for future reform.

The series will also consider the examination system and propose serious changes. Not only should the misguided paraphernalia of the national curriculum, with its bureaucratic programmes for different 'key stages' and 'levels' be ended, because they undermine the integrity of subject teaching and the professionalism of the classroom teacher. So too should the assessment criteria, tasks and skills. We should return to an examination system in which knowledge, understanding and, as pupils

¹ In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for 2009, the UK's ranking in the international tests for numeracy, literacy and science taken by 15 year olds fell from 2006. In reading the UK was ranked 25th (17th in 2006), in maths 28th (24th in 2006) and in science 16th (14th in 2006). <http://stats.oecd.org/PISA2009Profiles/#> Pisa (2009), Pisa (2006). *The Guardian*, 10 Dec 2010.

² 16 per cent of 16-24 year olds are not in education, employment or training (18 yr olds - 14.3 per cent, 16 yr olds - 6.3 per cent, 2011). www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STR/d001019/osr13-2011.pdf.

EU undergraduate admissions to Oxford rose by 0.9 per cent in 2011 from 2010; UK admissions rose by 0.4 per cent. Cambridge EU undergraduate admissions rose by one per cent whereas home admissions fell by one per cent (2009 to 2010). University of Cambridge response to Freedom of Information request, 18 Oct 2011, <http://bit.ly/HWydVZ>.

³ *Comparing Standards Academic and Vocational 16-19 Year Olds*, D. Burghes, A. Smithers, R. Tombs et al

become older, judgement, are measured by experienced markers, who assess answers according to their own informed professional standards. A new examination system is needed therefore, which allows for high aspiration and the academic integrity of individual subjects. By contrast, the present arrangements constrain teaching to fit the managerial mark schemes favoured by officials to the detriment of the subjects.

Politeia's curriculum series will analyse the problems across a range of subjects and propose two main principles for change:

- (i) That government intervention in the classroom must be kept to a minimum, so that good teachers have freedom to teach. If a national curriculum is to be required by law, it should consist of the barest outlines, a mere guide as to what parts of a subject should have been covered, at minimum, after 4-6 years of secondary schooling.
- (ii) That such curricula should be suggested by academic specialists in the relevant field, some of whom should also be encouraged to write text books for schools. The same should happen for examinations, which should be set by academic specialists and marked by those who know the subjects. Officials or professional educationists should *not* be involved in drawing up the curriculum or proposing how it should be implemented or examined.

Robert Tombs and his co-authors launch the series with an analysis of the problems of present arrangements in so far as they affect history teaching at school and proposals for the basis of a different approach. In the separate online appendix, Professor Tombs and two other distinguished historians, Professors David Abulafia and Jonathan Clarke, each suggest a curriculum based on the above principles. Each curriculum consists of a chronological outline of the headings he would emphasise for teaching the history of this country over four (or six) years at secondary school. While we hope schools will also teach European and world history, given that the government intends in the first place that British history ought to be taught, these curricula are restricted to it. They are designed as an outline guide for teachers (and the Secretary of State for Education) to cover the broad span of British history from the time of Hadrian to the later twentieth century.

It is hoped that if the principles above are accepted for the new curriculum, then some of our leading academic historians will write school history texts which teachers and schools can choose to use in accordance with their professional judgements.

Above all the series will emphasize the academic values rooted in each subject. These can only be properly understood by those versed in the subject: the teachers, who should be allowed to teach in accord with their judgement, and the academic subject specialists, whose lifetime of study qualifies them to propose the curricula and set the examinations. The exams should be assessed not according to rigid criteria but to the judgement of experts marking them. Officials of government or its agencies should have no place in the process.

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On-line appendices

(i) Suggested history curricula by David Abulafia, Jonathan Clark and Robert Tombs *et al.*

(ii) Full on-line appendix by Robert Tombs with Abby Waldman and Christopher Moule.

See www.politeia.co.uk/appendix

I

Introduction: What's Wrong with School History?

England is unusual in giving so little value to history at school. Compared with other western democracies, history counts only as a small part of our education. School history can be characterised as having an incoherent, fragmented, and often repetitive curriculum, and a problematic examination system. History seems to have become a subject for an elite minority, for the brighter pupils, taught to relatively few – fewer than one in three GCSE candidates in comprehensive schools take it and many schools do not even offer it. So most children are deprived of the possibility of understanding their own history. When we lament declining political participation, or alienation, we should bear this in mind.

History as prescribed for English schools today has little in common with real historical study. The official remit makes it unlikely that pupils will learn the broad sweep of their country's past or understand the vital links with the wider world that shaped its development. Rather, if their teachers stick to the official curriculum and examinations, pupils will be constrained by a remit too detailed yet too narrow, too demanding yet too boring. Behind this state of affairs is over-specialization on a scattering of unrelated topics coupled with an excessive emphasis on 'skills' which can lead to the repetition of the same subjects in successive years. It would be difficult to name a European country that teaches history in such a manner, one which can leave the majority of school-leavers in the dark about the unfolding story of their past.

Our present compulsory curriculum lags behind other countries in its neglect of swathes of European history, despite the historical ties over centuries to the continent's dynasties and religious, cultural and architectural heritages. Often, but not invariably, scant attention is paid to another central theme of modern English identity: empire, and the ties that channelled post-colonial immigration.

By contrast, in France, Switzerland and Germany, for example, pupils during their time at school will acquire at least a broad acquaintance with the whole chronological sweep of global and national history. In France, the rule, and expectation, for 11-16 year olds is that the sweep of history from ancient history to the 20th century will be covered, with the opportunity for 16-19 year olds to specialize. A sample of the French curriculum for one year is given below. In Germany under the Federal system, where most Länder still have three types of secondary school, each Land is responsible for its schools and the expectation is that pupils will cover much of the sweep of history, though with some sensitivity in approaching the 20th century German question. In the Swiss cantons, each canton is responsible for its schools but the general expectation is for the broad sweep to be taught up to 16, with more

specialized study after. Even countries such as Australia, which have taken the same path as England, are now leaving it.

Good and successful history teaching treats historical knowledge and understanding as central. But what is accepted in similar neighbouring countries has been lost here. The fundamental change needed to history teaching is that the curriculum should be based on prescribing less, not more; that it should aim for greater simplicity, greater freedom, greater coherence, greater transparency, and less interference. This pamphlet proposes the simplest framework designed to set good teachers free to teach.

Sample Curriculum for one year – French equivalent of Key Stage 3 (Age 11-14)

The French system, introduced in the 1990s, is structured round repères (‘orientation points’). The example given below shows that a simple structure can create a broad and coherent curriculum, into which sources in the broadest sense (including buildings, maps, literary texts) can be integrated. It also manages, though keeping the main focus on France, to give a broader international framework.

From 1090 to 1600

Western Christianity	Maps for study	Orientation points	Heritage
1. The Church	-spread of Roman and Gothic art	-the First Crusade (1095) -Bernard of Clairvaux (12 th C) -Francis of Assisi (13th century)	-an abbey -a cathedral
2. Political structures and society	-political map of the west in the 13th century -commercial routes and fairs (13th century)	- Land clearance (12th-13 th Centuries) -Magna Carta (1215) -Black Death (mid-14th century)	-a castle <i>-The Romance of Renart</i> -selected town plans

<p>3. The Kingdom of France (10th-15th centuries):</p> <p>The growth of the State</p>	<p>-territorial growth of the kingdom</p>	<p>-rise of Hugh Capet (987)</p> <p>-the century of Louis IX (13th century)</p> <p>-the campaign of Joan of Arc (1429-1431)</p>	<p>-the basilica of Saint-Denis</p> <p>- Rheims cathedral</p> <p>-Joinville : The Life of Saint-Louis</p>
The Birth of the Modern Age			
<p>1. Humanism, the Renaissance, the Reformation</p>	<p>-the main centres of humanism and the Renaissance</p> <p>-religious divisions in Europe at the end of the 16th century</p>	<p>-the Gutenberg Bible (mid-15th century)</p> <p>-Luther's theses (1517)</p> <p>-Calvin at Geneva</p> <p>-the Council of Trent</p>	<p>-extracts from the works of Rabelais</p> <p>-the Sistine Chapel</p> <p>-a Renaissance palace</p>
<p>2. Europe and overseas exploration</p>	<p>-the great explorations</p> <p>-colonial empires</p>	<p>-the taking of Grenada</p> <p>-Christopher Columbus (1492)</p>	<p>-Marco Polo's <i>Travels</i></p> <p>-a galleon</p>
<p>3. The Kingdom of France in the 16th century: challenges to royal authority</p>	<p>-the Kingdom of France in the 16th century</p>	<p>-the Decree of Villers-Cotterêts (1539)</p> <p>-the Edict of Nantes (1598)</p>	<p>-text of Decree of Villers-Cotterêts</p> <p>-text of Edict of Nantes</p>

Source: Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, *Programmes du cycle central: 5^e et 4^e. Livret 1* (Paris: CNDP, 1997), pp. 38-9.

II

The Present Approach and its Pitfalls

Several connected problems in the present system can readily be identified:

- History is studied as a disconnected succession of over-specialized and decontextualized topics
- The ‘skills’ required are often hollow and mean little to those forced to acquire or indeed teach them
- Examinations impose complex and intellectually dubious criteria which distort historical study and writing
- The nature of the examinations requires excessive coaching, and often makes examination technique rather than historical understanding the focus of teaching
- The multiplicity of examination boards combined with the problematic nature of the curriculum can permit and encourage repetition of topics at different stages or at the same stage by multiple retaking of modules
- Coursework takes up excessive time, can lead to cheating and can be difficult for those without access to good libraries, skilled teaching and parental support
- The quality of examining, due to the arcane and complex system, can be poor, often with unreliable and what may seem to be unjust outcomes, as recent press reports have suggested⁴

⁴ ‘Exam boards: how examiners tip off teachers to help students pass’, 7 December 2011, *Daily Telegraph* (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/secondaryeducation/8940781/Exam-boards-how-examiners-tip-off-teachers-to-help-students-pass.html>). ‘Ofqual inquiry orders exam change’, 21 December 2011, *BBC News* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-16273366>).

How did we get into this predicament? One reason is the emphasis on a certain notion of what constitutes historical skills. This has been taken to require a high level of detail and specialization, for example, in analysing and ‘evaluating’ documents or juxtaposing the views of different historical writers. But these ‘skills’ are not thought to require a broader understanding of the historical context, or a coherent programme of study. So throughout their secondary school career, pupils are encouraged to pick and mix. A typical combination might be: Year 7 (age 11-12) – medieval and Tudor England; Year 8 (12-13) – Industrial Revolution in England; Native peoples in America; Year 9 (13-14) – World War One, the Nazis, modern world history. A typical A-level combination would be: German dictatorship 1871-1945; Communist Russia or China; post-war politics in Britain; Northern Ireland. There is no link between these topics; they do not explain or illuminate each other; they give no cumulative benefit other than (at best) an accumulation of facts. Consequently, pupils cannot acquire a sense of the development over time of any society or country, including their own.

Let us examine three of the most damaging problems: over-specialization, repetition, and examinations.

Over-specialization

The present combination of curriculum and examination requires immersion in absurdly arcane political, legislative and even diplomatic detail, at the expense of studying chronological and geographical sweep, fundamental concepts, processes of change, and the development of societies and cultures – all of which would provide more valuable historical education.

The level of specialization and detail can reach almost surreal extremes, which few university students would be expected to reach unless taking highly specialized topics towards the end of their degree courses. For example, pupils studying Edexcel’s ‘International Relations’ (¼ of GCSE) on the period 1929-1969 need to know about the machinations of Hungary’s internal politics between 1953 and 1956, about the ‘Pact of Steel’, the Lytton Commission, Tito’s visit to Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Greek Civil War, the Bulgarian post-war elections and scores of other topics. Pupils of this age inevitably lack a basic general grasp of political structures and of geopolitics, let alone historical context, and so it is hard to see any intellectual benefit of such study. It cannot but produce mechanical learning, forgotten as soon as examinations are over.

Over-specialization on a few topics crowds out vast areas of history. Hardly any GCSE courses at present offer anything at all from before 1870 (only the Schools History Project’s ‘Medicine through time’ or ‘Crime and Punishment through time’). The late Middle Ages and most of the eighteenth century (a pinnacle of cultural and

intellectual history, and arguably the period in which England had most impact on the rest of the world) are scarcely represented at all in any option at A-level. Until recently, the International Baccalaureate had hardly anything before the French Revolution, and it has little indeed on major subjects such as the British Empire.

Over-specialization also inevitably puts teachers under pressure: pupils have to take copious notes as teachers supply minute factual details. There remains too little class time for imaginative teaching and discussion.

The problem is aggravated by the narrowness and prescriptive nature of examination questions. An exasperating feature at GCSE is the expectation for two, or three, or four examples/arguments, depending on the question. (For instance, ‘What were the key features of the Pact of Steel?’ requires three ‘key features’ – not two or four!) These questions often seem arbitrary and un-thought-out; yet they are an important feature of the new Edexcel GCSE. Even more unfairly, the examination papers do not specify how many examples are needed – candidates have to remember or guess the unspecified requirements of the marking schemes.

Both the skills component (requiring a large amount of writing and also arcane and awkward ‘techniques’) and the scale of minute factual knowledge required mean that pupils are often deterred from taking history. So too are teachers who wish to steer pupils towards subjects in which they are more likely to gain a ‘C’ or above. Many less able pupils enjoy History at Key Stage 3 (age 11-14), but gradually sense (correctly) that they would struggle badly with it at GCSE. Though the proportion gaining Cs or above is similar to other subjects, this is because the candidates may in general be the more able. There is simply too much at GCSE; A-level, paradoxically, is relatively less demanding.

This is a formidable barrier to making the present system of GCSE history compulsory, as many pupils would be unable to cope. History should be a basic part of our education, whether or not it is compulsory. In either case, GCSE must be made more accessible as a subject from which the majority of pupils can reasonably be expected to profit and in which they can succeed.

Repetition

Coping with the present overloaded system, by schools and pupils, encourages repeating the same area of study at successive stages in order to obtain the best marks and ratings. Most notoriously, this can mean children studying Hitler three times during their school career: at Key Stage 3, at GCSE, and at A-level or the International Baccalaureate; topics such as the World Wars and Communist Russia are also commonly repeated. Important though the Third Reich is in modern European history, it should not be the principal staple of pupils’ historical study over five or more years.

Repetition leaves little time for other major themes in modern history, let alone earlier periods and other continents.

Pupils must spend even more of their time going over topics they have already done. At both GCSE and A-level disproportionate time has to be given over to examination preparation and coaching. In many schools it would be common for two of six terms to be devoted entirely to examinations and revision at GCSE; about one term of three at AS level (16-17), and one and a half terms of three at A2 (17-18). Many schools will do more, especially at GCSE. Those who do less risk seriously imperilling their results. Therefore, perhaps a third of teaching time in history is given to repeating material already studied. The modular system (especially at A-level, but it also extends less aggressively to GCSE) further aggravates the practice of repetition. Fewer examinations and less coaching in arcane requirements would allow more time to study intelligently.

Examinations

Two serious problems arise from the official criteria examination boards are obliged to apply: first, how historical ‘skills’ should be tested, and second, the basis for assessment and marking. Both are a source of concern to history teachers. Many believe that examination boards are failing to produce papers that can be fairly marked: for example, a 2011 GCSE paper actually managed seriously to misquote the source it required candidates to interpret. There is a danger that the system as a whole does not inspire the confidence that it ought.

A-level is even worse. The convoluted mark schemes (which require hoop-jumping by using approved phrases and essay formats) often seem too much for examiners themselves to cope with. The dismal and erratic standard of marking can be demoralising for pupils and teachers alike. It is common for pupils to receive grades two, three or even four away from what their teachers have predicted. Many examiners seem to know little about the topics they mark – frequently less than the candidates. The mark schemes at A-level are so complex that confusion among examiners is understandable, though hardly excusable.

These inconsistencies are particularly serious as university entrance is now so dominated by grades; hence the time consuming and self-defeating process of appeals and remarking. Erratic marking is a major reason why modules are taken three or even four times.

At the core of the problem at both GCSE and A-level are the ‘skills’ requirements. These have become convoluted, hard to follow, and of dubious relevance to genuine historical understanding. Even if the testing of such skills is regarded as desirable, the sheer weight and complexity of the requirements is indefensible. Any school that takes

its results seriously must focus hard on a daunting list of requirements, which vary from paper to paper and question to question. For 16-18 year olds these requirements are unfair and tough, and inevitably many switch off. Many teachers lament having to spend lessons trying to explain the system, to the neglect of real history.

The division at GCSE and A-level between ‘source-based’ and ‘non source-based’ papers is thoroughly artificial. Under the present system, ‘skills’ and ‘content’ are treated and examined separately in ‘source-based’ and ‘non source-based’ papers in almost caricatural form. Sources ought to be used naturally, as an integral part of historical study and writing, not as a disembodied exercise. Source-work accounts for about 40 per cent of GCSE, and slightly less at A-level, depending on the board. At present, the artificiality of the questions around sources produces formulaic answers of dubious intellectual or academic value. Consequently, a balanced approach, in which historical skills can be logically fostered through a broad, working acquaintance with historical argument and practice, is not being achieved at *any* level, as has frequently been documented.

An example of this artificial and convoluted approach is the GCSE (Edexcel) source paper. Questions require candidates (a) to infer the gist of a short passage (sometimes easy, sometimes obscure); (b) to summarize the message and function of a source; (c) to compare the degree to which three sources agree or disagree about the same issue; (d) to discuss the usefulness or reliability of two sources; (e) to discuss whether six sources [sic!] generally support or contest a statement. The candidate’s actual knowledge and understanding of the subject receives only small credit (ten or twenty per cent maximum). The mark scheme is thoroughly prescriptive and artificial, and requires questions to be answered in a particular way, even with a set order of paragraphs.

A variant – which seems to have produced the effects deplored by practising historians (p.10) – is seen in the OCR ‘Investigations and Interpretations’ coursework. Candidates are required to ‘compare’ the views of historians on a chosen subject. This is the only aspect of the subject they need to study. They are rewarded for ‘evaluating’ these views, a highly artificial process which pupils and teachers hate. The travails of teenagers summarising professional historians and then attempting to challenge their arguments is agonising to witness – but the more they go through this process, the more marks they can be given, as their teachers mark this paper.

This A2 work, more than any other, is responsible for the artificial and pedestrian work produced by many good students when they arrive at university – which university teachers then have to get them to stop. What they have painfully learned to do at school is likely get them bad marks at university.

III

What the Critics Say: Official and Unofficial

The failings and their consequences have prompted official and unofficial criticism. Strikingly Ofsted, the government's official inspectorate, has repeatedly drawn attention to the serious and interconnected failings of the system at all levels. A range of official and independent views agree in their essential criticisms: that pupils do not acquire a broad and coherent sense of historical connections and concepts; that the requirements imposed on teachers and students are artificial and sterile; that real success is achieved in spite of the system, not because of it; and most alarmingly, that genuine intellectual insight is discouraged and even penalized:

- The types of examination questions at GCSE, especially about dealing with sources, have become formulaic and, increasingly, teachers have been able to drill students to do well in them. (Ofsted, *History for All: History in English Schools 2007/10*, 2011)
- Pupils' knowledge and understanding are too fragmented and they do not know enough about key events, people and issues. (Ofsted, *History in primary schools*, 2005)
- '[B]y 14 a lot of students emerge from their study of history without a sufficiently confident overview of the past; they are quite good at knowing certain topics in great depth, but not how all the bits fit together, making the programme of study feel rather disjointed.' (Jerome Freeman and Tina Isaacs, 'The 11–19 curriculum and qualifications', *Qualifications and Curriculum Authority*, 2005)
- Too often, the focus in school history is on developing ... in-depth knowledge of specific topics ... at the expense of an overview of history which helps [pupils] to see and understand links between different historical events and periods, and change over time. As a result, young people's knowledge is often very patchy and specific; they are unable sufficiently to link discrete historical events to answer big questions, form overviews and demonstrate strong conceptual understanding. They often do not know about key historical events, people and ideas and there is often unjustified repetition of

topics at different stages of pupils' school careers ... there is a strong case that [history] should be a compulsory subject ... This is why the weaknesses indicated by inspection evidence are of considerable concern. (Ofsted, *History in secondary schools*, 2005)

- Teachers' concerns 'related to a growing emphasis on generic "skills" at the expense of specific subject understanding' (Historical Association, *Survey of History in Schools in England*, 2010)

Pupils and historians see the consequences. Two views come from users of the system at its most advanced level: from an academic historian and an A-level student:

- The best essays [writes an Oxford historian with experience of judging over 1,500 sixth form essays submitted for a college prize] remain outstanding... Other less encouraging characteristics have, however, become more and more noticeable in recent years. [They include] the creation of an essay as a tessellation of quotations – 'quotes' – from historians ... It is very difficult, often impossible, to detect any line of argument being advanced by the candidate. In the current jargon, they tick the boxes; but they are in truth not much more than cut-and-paste exercises, some from text-books, some from the internet ... This ... encourages conformity and discourages originality, argumentativeness, ingenuity, passion: all the qualities which make for great historical writing. Time and again the essays which we judge to be amongst the best ... secure mediocre marks from the A-level or other examiners. (Dr George Garnett, in *History Review*, March 2011, commenting on his experience over 17 years.)
- Answers must be formulaic [writes a sixth form pupil commenting on the consequences in the classroom] and often the course work is based on ... assumptions that can't be challenged because of the ... 'assessment objective'... [Although] the assessment objectives may be dull, and are often absurd, meeting them is the key to getting a good grade ... We don't spend our history lessons doing anything very much beyond trying to understand the marking scheme ... (Letter from Ella Raff, an A-level student, to *London Review of Books*, 19 May 2011.)

IV

School History for the Future

School history could and should be so different. Teaching it well should involve imagination, sympathy, cultural exploration, enthusiasm and excitement both at the variety of human cultures and at the particular experience of England; but it should be neither narrow nor insular and should introduce what may today seem the remote and strange – lost civilisations, mysterious beliefs, and unfamiliar practices – helping to provide the foundations for understanding the diversity, the achievements and the problems of today’s world. It should allow for the discovery of traces of the past on our doorsteps, whether ancient field and street patterns, medieval churches, castles, pictures, objects, works of art and literature, cottages and pubs, schools, hospitals and housing estates.

History should be an important part of every child’s education up to and including GCSE, and so it must be accessible to a wide range of abilities, which is not now the case. This is not to ask for ‘dumbing down’: rather, it is to urge an intellectually valuable and appropriate study, without excessive specialization, unnecessary detail, or over-concentration on dubious techniques.

Valuable skills will be acquired as an important by-product: for example, gaining insight into other societies and cultures; using critical thought; analysing institutions and processes; assimilating complex materials; understanding the sources of historical knowledge; writing cogently; and piecing together evidence to build a fuller picture. Students should be able to recognize and understand a range of concepts (such as Feudalism, Renaissance, Reformation, Industrial Revolution), to place them chronologically and geographically, and to answer questions about them; but they should not be expected to analyse them in minute detail or concentrate excessively on debates among professional historians.

The aim of school history should emphatically *not* be to produce novice professional historians – that can be left to universities – but to ensure that a considerable part of the population has a good historical understanding. This means a curriculum that has a broad and coherent foundation, and is not merely a miscellany of disconnected fragments.

Changing the curriculum

The curriculum should be simple, connected, and coherent. It is not intellectually necessary or educationally desirable to prescribe it in detail. It should be confined to a

short outline arranged chronologically which will allow teachers to choose how to teach, lead to open-ended study and permit a simpler and more sensible system of examinations. It should aim to set teachers free for good teaching and allow rewarding study by pupils over the full range of ability.

Teachers should be encouraged to choose their emphases and methods within a broad chronological framework for the main periods, from Roman Britain to the twentieth century. The aim is not to define a complete compendium of essential knowledge but to provide a framework on which examinations can be based, without imposing a minute and prescriptive curriculum.

There will of course be many views of how this can best be done in practice. In the hope of stimulating discussion, suggestions for how this might be done are outlined in the online appendix.* It is possible to cover the whole of English/British history in a coherent way, including the European and global context.

A curriculum that includes a broadly chronological framework and knowledge of key historical events and themes does not equate with political bias – on the contrary – and it should not be a matter of party-political controversy. One need only look at France, where the necessity of such an approach has long been the object of cross-party, public, and academic consensus. The curriculum proposed here is far less prescriptive in detail than comparable parts of the National Curriculum today, and the real historical understanding and capacity for reasoned argument which it seeks to foster are inimical to indoctrination of any sort.

Changing the examination system

Without radical change to the system there will be scant possibility of improvement. Examinations must not require complex coaching which distorts teaching and learning, as at present they do. Ideally, they should not reward coaching at all. They should rather reward what most benefits the student: breadth of knowledge, understanding, and the ability to analyse and formulate a cogent argument. More rigorous marking of fewer and simpler examinations, testing knowledge, understanding and truly useful abilities, should be the rule.

There would be no function for the modular system, which should, as many teachers urge, be abolished. There should be one set of examinations for GCSE and one for A-level, and no re-sits. This would lead to a fairer system where every candidate is tested under the same conditions on the same basis.

* www.politeia.co.uk/appendix

Coursework has its defenders and its critics. The case can be made that it can take up disproportionate time, can narrow the scope of the curriculum as a whole, can be prone to plagiarism or cheating, or can favour children fortunate enough to have exceptional teachers, well-stocked school libraries, well-educated parents. Others believe that with good teaching that motivates and stimulates, coursework encourages interest in the subject, sustained application and disciplined writing – and it also encourages teachers to aspire higher.

This pamphlet proposes, for both GCSE and A-level, three forms of examination which all students would take: a set of broad survey papers (60 per cent of total mark); an essay paper (20 per cent); and a third element, either a prepared essay paper or, optionally, coursework (20 per cent).

a) Survey papers

The aim is to find an examination system that does not constrain and regiment, but which rewards breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding, and makes it worthwhile for teachers and pupils to be adventurous and creative in their study of history. Broad multiple-choice papers, carefully set, are one way of doing this, and we advocate these, and provide detailed examples in an appendix.* Another possible approach would be to set a number of questions (around ten to fifteen) which require candidates to write short paragraph-length answers, covering a substantial range of periods. Both types of paper could include commentaries on a range of evidence.

The advantages of survey papers, however they are designed, include their capacity to test breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding at a range of abilities at different levels of sophistication. Breadth, in that a large number of questions can be provided over an extensive chronological and geographical range, and candidates who can answer more questions are naturally rewarded. Depth, in that questions can be designed to test the ability to recognize and understand a wide range of ideas, historical processes, and source materials (including statistics, images, maps, texts, building styles, artistic representations). Having the level of understanding to make an educated guess where necessary is a highly desirable quality which such tests can measure.

It is important that this paper should provide a major part of the final mark (60 per cent is proposed here), as it is this that would encourage schools and pupils to cover as large a part of the curriculum as they can. Candidates could choose to take one, two or three papers. This would be a sufficient incentive to schools to provide a broad and coherent course of study without the need for complex regulation, and eliminate the incentive to repeat material. At GCSE level, the marking scheme should be designed

* www.politeia.co.uk/appendix

to make it possible for less academic children to succeed, while also stretching the most committed and able.

b) The essay paper

Both GCSE and A-Level should also require essay papers. The ability to produce sustained logical argument based on evidence and analysis is an important part of historical study and a rightly valued part of the English educational tradition.

The marking of essays raises challenges which at the moment are poorly met. Marking criteria should be simple: ‘strong sense of argument’, ‘good knowledge’ etc., and they should allow for a variety of ideas, styles and opinions, not a single regimented answer. Three essay papers are proposed – of which each candidate would choose one. The online model includes suggestions on how this could be based, for example, on ‘entry points’ in each of the three chronological divisions of the curriculum.

c) The prepared essay paper

This would be an optional alternative to coursework, and provide the opportunity for a study in depth. Candidates could choose a subject for examination (one question in one hour) for which they could take in notes. This is comparable to the present system for Controlled Assessment, but under more rigorous safeguards.

Changing teaching methods: giving teachers freedom

The major step will be to remove the constraints on teachers and pupils imposed by an over-detailed curriculum and its rigid, artificial examination criteria. The changes proposed are not another prescription, but a liberation intended to encourage a range of methods: these could include individual reading; class discussion, re-enactment and debate; study of documents, works of literature, images and artefacts; visits to museums and use of their teaching programmes; and many other activities inside and outside the classroom.

The aim is to open up a theme to a range of teaching methods, not close it down by over-prescription. Some comments on teaching suggest in general terms how this might be done.*

* See appendix, www.politeia.co.uk/appendix

V

What This Means for School History

The present system of school history in England has proved itself too deeply flawed to be remedied by minor modification. As things stand, it is difficult for English pupils to acquire a broad and coherent knowledge of their own country's history, depriving future citizens of an essential part of their common culture. This pamphlet proposes that English history and its links with the wider world should be at the heart of the curriculum.

Instead of a highly detailed curriculum of excessively specialized fragments, depriving children of broad understanding of the great themes of history, a clear, connected, and chronologically coherent framework is proposed.

Instead of the present, often rigid emphasis on drilling in and testing of supposed historical 'skills', genuine historical skills, arising from knowledge and understanding of the past, should be an inherent part of historical study, not a separate artificial exercise.

The aims are greater simplicity, greater freedom, greater coherence, greater transparency, less manipulation, less interference. This pamphlet proposes how this can be done in practice, by suggesting possibilities with the simplest legal framework, which will set good teachers free to teach and pupils free to learn.

In the online appendices to this pamphlet, practical ways in which these aims could be achieved are set out.

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How history is taught in English schools has long been a matter of controversy. But this has not led to effective history lessons. Rather, too many pupils leave school without a broad knowledge of the country's past and the understanding to which this leads. Indeed, as *Lessons from History: Freedom, Aspiration and the New Curriculum* shows, under the present, highly prescriptive system, many teachers feel obliged to select narrow topics or episodes and drill their pupils to do well at examinations. Pupils are in danger of leaving school without knowing the sweep of the country's history.

Professor Tombs and his co-authors identify the weaknesses of the present system and propose the principles on which a new curriculum should build. There should, they say, be minimal government prescription and interference. The new curriculum should provide a short outline arranged chronologically, one based on greater simplicity and greater freedom. The expectation should be that a considerable part of the population should leave school with a good historical understanding.

In a separate on-line appendix, the authors show how these principles could be introduced. Their suggestions are complemented by other exemplary curricula for history from Professors David Abulafia and Jonathan Clarke.

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