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New Direction Needed for School History: HMG should aim for greater freedom and a syllabus where knowledge counts, says Cambridge academic in new Politeia piece.

England's school history is in a sorry state. Not only has it become a 'minority' subject at GCSE; but even among those who do choose it, too many leave school without a grasp of the sweep of their country's past. So argue Robert Tombs and his co-authors in *Lessons from History: Freedom, Aspiration and the New Curriculum*. Their message will have resonance as the Coalition plans its new curriculum. How can schools ensure that pupils learn about the country's history, its impact on the world, and the people, places and events that shaped it?

Professor Tombs* analyses the current problems. The system fails to teach a broad range of British, or for that matter, European, history. Rather, the same few topics tend to be repeated over and over again. GCSE history demands too much specialization, with little attention paid to chronology or the context of change over time. The upshot is that pupils know little, and understand less, of the background to fundamental concepts. The exam system fails pupils by placing too much emphasis on 'skills' over knowledge, and a convoluted and erratic mark scheme often leaves candidates and teachers demoralised. In particular, the authors suggest that:

- History at school is a disconnected succession of over-specialised topics.
- The skills demanded are often hollow and have little real value.
- The examinations distort historical study and writing, and the quality of examining is too often poor and leads to unjust outcomes.

Professor Tombs argues that the purpose of school history is not to produce professional historians but to ensure that most of the population has a good historical understanding. Two fundamental principles should guide the new curriculum: minimal government prescription and interference in the curriculum, and maximum freedom for teachers. A new exam system, with broader survey papers ranging over time, should reward breadth of knowledge and understanding rather than skills. In the author's words: the aims are 'greater simplicity, greater freedom ... less interference ... with the simplest legal framework which will set good teachers free to teach'.

In her general introduction to the series, **Politeia's Director, Dr Sheila Lawlor**, explains that a national curriculum should consist of the barest outline to serve as a guide to what must be covered, and that the curricula across the full range should be suggested by academics in the field, and not government officials or professional educationists.

In an on-line appendix, Professor Tombs, along with fellow historians **Professors David Abulafia and Jonathan Clark**, show how these recommendations could be put into practice, taking pupils through from Roman Britain to the late 20th Century. See www.politeia.co.uk/appendix (goes live after publication).

* Robert Tombs is Professor of French History at Cambridge and a Fellow of St John's College. David Abulafia FBA is Professor of Mediterranean History at Cambridge and a Fellow of Gonville and Caius College. Jonathan Clark became the Hall Distinguished Professor of British History at Kansas University in 1995, after having held fellowships at All Souls College, Oxford and Peterhouse, Cambridge.

**Lessons from History* is the first publication in Politeia's Curriculum Series. It will be launched at Politeia on Thursday 26th April at 12pm. If you would like to attend, please call Alex Krasodomski Jones at the press office.

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