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The DfES History Group and its implications: making the connections

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I am going to talk today about what we have been trying to do in the informal History Group within the [Department for Education and Skills](#) (DfES) over the last two years. Some of you will already be familiar with the work of this group, but I hope that by illustrating its work you will be able to see how what you are talking about today fits in with the government's thoughts on these subjects, and how in practical terms these things will be taken forward over the next six to 12 months. I will begin by saying a few words about the genesis of the group.

When I became editor of *History Today* in 1985, the magazine did not have a current affairs section. I thought it would be a useful and relevant addition to the magazine, and one of the first contributions that we had to that section was a lively series of discussions about the history content of the newly emerging national curriculum. So to come back here today some 16 years later and find that we are still talking about the national curriculum and how it relates is both assuring as it has clearly had a major impact, but also slightly worrying in the sense that there are still big issues to be addressed.

It was because of this that about 18 months ago, the then Secretary of State for Education, Charles Clarke, asked me if I would be prepared to put together an ad hoc group of historians and people involved in the educational history world on an informal basis, to talk him and some of his senior civil servants through some of the issues involved in the teaching of history. That was the genesis of the DfES History Group and we have met many times on our own as a group, and also had several meetings with ministers since the group was set up.

There was no magic formula to the people we invited to join us. We tried to get people from the secondary sector, people from both the old and the new universities, and key representatives from the history world in the media and in educational publishing, such as Peter Furtado (*History Today*), Greg Neale (*BBC History* magazine) and Bamber Gascoigne. Since the group's formation we have attempted, from our different perspectives, to tease out some of the key issues that we felt needed addressing and to focus, as my title suggests, on making connections. Making these connections really sums up what the group has tried to do; we have been conscious of the fact that all sorts of interesting ideas and initiatives were floating around in secondary education, in universities, in further education, and in the heritage and media worlds - and these separate sectors needed to come together to share their thoughts.

In the recommendations that were finally presented to DfES just before the last general election, we made practical suggestions that could be taken up by a government department in conjunction with its existing partners over the next two to three years. The emphasis was on the practical knowledge and practical implications of what could and could not be done. The recommendations came under four headings: first, the development of a strategy for reconnecting history between the secondary and higher education sectors; second, a more strategic approach to career professional development for historians in both the secondary and tertiary sectors; third, an exploration of the way in which we use ICT in the teaching of history and its broader implications for our appreciation of our heritage and issues of social inclusion; and finally, the practical ways of actually acting on these recommendations.

Addressing the first issue of reconnecting history between the secondary and the HE sectors, we have been acutely conscious of the Realpolitik needs surrounding this area. For any initiative to succeed, it has to take place within a structured framework; there has to be a formal recognition in terms of rewards and financial support which will have clear benefits for the career development of historians; but, crucially, any initiative has to work alongside the [Research Assessment Exercise](#) (RAE) process and be recognised and rewarded in connection with it.

While there are probably a wide range of views in the audience today on the RAE - from the favourable to the unprintable - there is no benefit in trying to challenge the structure of the RAE head on, although there is merit in making clear that there are other things that historians do at university level that should be recognised as part of the RAE process. Our recommendations looked at universities' engagement with the [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority](#) and Examination Boards to develop the curriculum at GCSE and A level, strengthening outreach programmes between universities and schools, colleges and the wider community, and using new technology to disseminate archives, particularly in the area of oral history and cutting-edge research in an accessible way. There are a number of universities that are already doing this and, importantly, working with local museums and with local archives.

The development of a strategic approach to career development must be seen in terms of its wider benefits to students, to pupils and to the broader community. But if we expect historians to do some of the things that we are talking about, we have to think beyond the narrow curriculum and beyond the latest RAE demand; we have to reward them in some way or other. That means possibly building on existing Inclusive Learning and Teaching (ILT) structures, perhaps with an overall initiative such 'Excellent Teacher' or 'Chartered History Teacher' status, or a high profile occasion - like a 'History Teaching Oscars', for example - at which achievement can be publicly recognised under categories such as outreach work, social inclusion, and links with the heritage sector and museums.

The third area is ICT. We feel that it is not a question of reinventing the wheel, or instituting from on high some all-singing, all-dancing multi-billion pound ICT network funded by the DfES - even if it did have the money! However, in the area of heritage and museums, which is vital for history learning and understanding for both students and teachers, there is a great deal more to be done. The involvement of the skills and experiences of experts in the print and publishing media industries can make a real difference. The impact of the free museums admission policy has had an important impact on school groups, but the reality is that there are still many school children who do not visit museums or heritage and archaeological sites for a range of reasons - some to do with health and safety, some to do with issues of distance, cost and time. So we can make a significant difference using an online curriculum network, online collections, the material which already exists online from magazines such as *History Today* and *BBC History*, and other creatively designed web resources.

It is also important to remember that this is not just an issue for the DfES; citizenship, for example, is an area with a [Home Office](#) remit; heritage, archives and museum activity also invite close cooperation with the [Department for Culture, Media and Sport](#); and initiatives for archaeology and heritage sites can bring in the [Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs](#), which has already begun to fund, on a modest scale, a certain amount of rescue archaeology and educational work. All these government departments must not only talk and listen to each other, but also build an alliance across the departments so that the things that we care about in terms of the way in which history affects schools, higher education and the wider community have the broadest consensus of support.

I will conclude with a few words about why I think these issues matter so much now. They matter obviously to everybody in this room because everybody in this room is in one way or another intimately concerned with history in schools and higher education; but over and beyond that, they matter because they

concern the fabric of citizenship and of our country today. The Labour party is not alone in its concerns over issues of globalisation, of connection, of identity and particularly the debate on British identity, which inevitably has been seriously deepened since the events of 7 July 2005.

At a recent meeting, Trevor Phillips, the chair of the [Commission for Racial Equality](#), was asked why we should be so concerned about Britishness and defining it. He answered that if we do not concern ourselves with the definition then other people who do not perhaps have the breadth of approach in defining Britishness will define it for us. That is why I think that the debates in government and in public affairs over the next 12 months on identity, citizenship, Britishness, and the implications of all of these for public policy must contain a crucial historical element. The whole issue of citizenship in the curriculum needs to be examined and, as a member of the [Education and Skills Select Committee](#), I am looking forward to the fact Professor Sir Bernard Crick and various others who have been involved in the citizenship curriculum will be giving [oral evidence](#) this autumn about how that curriculum is working.

I am a passionate exponent of the value of history in civic society, and I believe that we can make a substantial and significant difference to certain public policy areas by an increased respect and understanding of the role of history in the national curriculum. However, in order for us to do that, the connections between what goes on in schools and what goes on in universities, and the implications for social inclusion and social benefit, must be fully understood within the profession and outside it. We need to hone down very precisely what it is that we want, the period of time over which we wish to achieve it and not allow ourselves to be deflected in promoting that. I hope that what I have told you today of the work that we are doing in the history group will give you confidence and stimulus to go forward in all your different ways.

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