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A politician's view

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I would like to give you some idea of where I think it is proper for politicians to be involved in history and education in this country, but also where we should not go. I will end with some brief suggestions for what governments might think about doing in terms of public policy in this area.

In one of the recent flurries of public discussion about how much British history should be taught, which is the most frequent way that this issue surfaces in politics, Eric Evans wrote that

historians who agree on little else seem unanimous that the skills and competencies which history develops can be acquired through study of almost any content given an appropriate range, depth and diversity of historical experience. It's difficult to dissent from the conclusion that compulsory British history has been imposed on examination groups for purely political reasons.

I understand the frustration that can be caused for professional historians and educationalists when politicians intervene to change established ways of working, apparently for political and not educational reasons, and of course there is a case to be made for leaving the content of what is studied to the professionals. History is a vital intellectual discipline whose value transcends the absorption of whatever facts politicians deem relevant. The [Office for Standards in Education](#) (Ofsted) certainly seems to be favouring such an approach when it discussed the so-called 'Hitlerisation' of history - that is, the repeated study of Nazi Germany, at GCSE and A Level - of which it said:

whether or not this revisiting is sensible depends very much on the purpose and approach taken by each school. Revisiting a period of history can be justified by the increased depth of treatment, the comparative emphasis and the intensity and methodology.

Politicians need to tread with even greater circumspection in any discussion of how history should be studied. The debate about whether history is invented or whether it is discovered does create particular problems for politicians because it stems, at least in part, from differences over how scholarship and power intersect. For that reason, any intervention by a politician will inevitably distort the terms of the debate.

Furthermore, it is hard to disagree with Eric Hobsbawm when he wrote recently in *The Guardian* that 'it is time to re-establish the coalition of those who believe in history as rational enquiry into the course of human transformations against those who distort history for political purposes'. (1) But I do not think that the conclusion to be drawn from this is that politicians should abstain from any view on the teaching of history. On the contrary, I believe politicians would be failing in their duty if they did not contribute. Nor is this simply a matter of discharging our democratic obligations about the efficient and accountable allocation of scarce public resources. Charles de Gaulle once commented that politics was too important to be left to the politicians. I am afraid that this politician believes that history is too important to be left to the historians, as it occupies a special place in our lives, telling us who we are and what we could be in ways that no other subject or intellectual discipline can.

Before I appear to be entering territory forbidden to me by Eric Hobsbawm, I want to make it clear that I agree with him that politicians should not co-opt historical scholarship for their own short term political ends. After I had agreed to speak at this conference, Tim Collins, the former Shadow Secretary of State for Education, gave a speech at the National Catholic Heads Conference on 27 January 2005 which illustrates how politicians can seek to co-opt history in this way. (2)

Mr Collins's speech began by expressing his favourable views on faith schools. It then turned to the exam system, and then he singled out history for his attention. It was the only subject that he discussed specifically, giving the reason that the problems surrounding history in education had become too great to ignore. Perhaps a certain wildness in his rhetoric gives a clue to why he was so exercised. 'Nothing is more important', he said, 'to the survival of the British nation than an understanding among its young of our shared heritage'. I share his belief about the importance of history, but does he really mean this - that 'nothing is more important to the survival of the nation'? Not economic competitiveness, nor military strength, nor social cohesion? He continued: 'We can't be surprised that some within the next generation do not value our parliamentary democracy if they know nothing of the English Civil War.' Again, a surprising statement. According to him, in what he calls, 'days gone by', people did have such knowledge and it was widespread. But it did not, for example, stop the well educated [Oswald Mosley](#) and his followers from seeking to overturn our democracy. There are many reasons why we might be worried about the health of our democracy, but I do not really think that ignorance of the Civil War is one of them.

And the emptiness of the policy solutions that he put forward gives us a further clue that his concerns lay somewhere other than in the most appropriate way of studying history. He planned to revitalise history in schools by drawing up 'a simple but clear list of the key facts, personalities and dates, which every child should be taught'. And this for a subject which, he rightly suggests, is so important for understanding 'our shared heritage and the struggles, foreign and domestic, which have secured our freedoms'. Where in his list of facts and personalities will there be the space to understand the roots of our entrepreneurial culture, how it developed, our profusion of religions and our great traditions of dissent and mass movements, the abolition of slavery, the Anti-Corn Law League, the evolution of mass democratic politics, let alone the long and extraordinary journeys taken by the labour movement and our common law, and the rich complexities of our social histories?

Is our great, richly complex and vibrant history really to be reduced to this thin litany of key facts and personalities? What does this focus of his concern suggest about the value placed on the intellectual disciplines of history in our education system? It indicates motives over and above a concern about the future of history and education. Although at the time of his speech there was no obvious reason to make such points now from an educational perspective, from a political point of view there was.

This speech coincided with the Conservative party's launch of its policy on immigration, enormously important as part of its campaign leading up to the general election in May 2005. That policy and this sudden concern about history display one common preoccupation: 'the survival of the British nation.' Whatever problems the British nation may currently face, and it does face quite a few, its survival is not commonly supposed to be one of them. If Mr Collins had really wished to avoid the suspicion that this speech was a populist attempt to spark the sort of feelings that his party's immigration policy was designed to spark, then he might have considered making it at a slightly different time and fleshing it out with more considered content.

Of course, he is not alone in seeking to co-opt history for his immediate political purposes. The problem exists overseas too; the history wars in India, for example, have been going on for the last ten or fifteen years, and the disputes in East Asia about the terrible destruction of Nanking 1937 have been used by

politicians to further their immediate political objectives. On a minor level in this country, every time that a politician accuses an opponent of being a fascist or a Stalinist, when the offence is only, perhaps, belonging to the Conservative party or believing in the National Health Service, they are as guilty. But the frequency of the offence does not excuse it, and it diminishes the importance of history to our country and the reasons why it should occupy such an important place in our curriculum.

It is not just the impact of the recent past that makes history so important. In my view, our history drives our sense of national identity, and this is why history should be enshrined by politicians at the heart of our education system. Our national identity is central to our politics and so it must be of central concern to politicians. Unresolved questions about our national identity run through many of the great issues facing this country today, from the constitutional settlement, to our role in Europe, from the war against terrorism, to great global flows of people and capital, the resulting rise of a new right-wing populism, the anti-globalisation movement, and even to how and why we deliver public services in the way that we do. Our response and our attitude to all these things is coloured by the sense we have of where we belong, and where we owe our loyalty and why.

The questions that flow around national identity are not part of some rarefied academic debate; they influence our public policy at home on a daily basis and determine how we position ourselves in the world. Are we a European country, for example, or an Anglo-Saxon country, or both? How we describe ourselves and what we feel ourselves to be fundamentally shapes public policy towards both Europe and the United States. The fact that Christianity is not such an important defining feature of our national identity gives us, for example, a different approach to Turkey's application for EU membership from other European countries where Christianity is more central to citizens' sense of themselves.

We live a period of tumultuous and rapid change. Rather than being submerged by the challenges of those changes, young people need to be equipped to seize the opportunities of change. They have got to have confidence in the future because unless you believe that tomorrow can be better than today, you will be unlikely to take the risks to make sure that it is. A sense of belonging, a rooted belief in one's country, is a critical part of the process of gaining that confidence. So in many ways a clear sense of national identity is more important than ever.

It has been argued that the political importance of national identity is waning. There have been great global transformations in the last fifty years which have challenged it. The dissolution of the British Empire removed those institutions and symbols so instrumental in defining Britishness for so long. Globalisation and growing interdependence has turned economies outward, and there has been consequent institutional change as nation states rely increasingly on multilateral institutions such as [Europe](#), the World Bank, the [World Trade Organization](#) (WTO), and so on. Air travel is cheaper and people travel more, and the ubiquity of television has made people far more aware of the rest of the world. Our moral community has broadened, as we saw with the extraordinary response to the Asian tsunami which struck in December 2004. These are all factors shaping a new global consciousness.

Despite these changes, the survey evidence and our own personal experience tell us that the nation survives, and still remains as the main locus of political identity. In fact, the destabilising effects of rapid global change which appear to threaten it also make it more important to individuals. Rapid and radical change makes people seek to root themselves in the familiar. It is not surprising, therefore, that the dreadful shock of what happened on the 11 September 2001 caused such an upsurge in patriotic feeling among Americans as they sought a mooring in this unexpected and savage storm.

This need to belong has always been a motor of history, and threats to a sense of belonging even more so. In the midst of change we all need to feel that we are secured somewhere and the nation state remains our anchor. So much of what roots us politically, economically and culturally flows from the nation state: our systems of education and justice, our public services of health and broadcasting, and our political institutions. The ties that bind us, that root us in our own place and time, the shared language, culture and social and political institutions are derived from the nation state. Our need to do this is obviously greater in times of crisis. In *The Identity of France* the French historian Fernand Braudel writes movingly of how, trudging back from the front in 1940, he clung to the belief that, despite this catastrophic defeat for France, what he called 'the real France' would survive. And he writes of how, forty years later, *The Identity of France* is his search for what that meant. (3)

So what role has history got to play in this? When most people think of their country, it is the present that concerns them, not the past. Without understanding our history (and by 'understanding' I do not mean the memorisation of facts and mini-biographies of great personalities), we cannot secure any coherent sense of national identity. Who we are as a nation is shaped by complex phenomena and their interactions, and trying to pin down identity is actually very difficult. Surveys of popular opinion about this often locate it in things like *Coronation Street*, current television series, even pop songs. However, when academics or politicians have tried to root it in something less ephemeral, more lastingly significant, it has proved a highly contentious exercise, and the furore over Samuel Huntington's book on the United States, shows just how difficult an exercise it can be. (4) The identity of a country could be rooted in its geography, in its ethnicity, in its institutions and in its values reflected through its institutions, and in varying mixes of all those components. And, yet, wherever it is located, as soon as it is pinned down and defined, it somehow loses its specificity.

In *The Identity of France*, Braudel describes how he once spoke to an academic conference in Germany of what he called 'the unparalleled diversity of France'. He says he was immediately assailed by his multi-national audience, and was finally forced to recognise that of course Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom, among others, could lay claim similarly to such 'unparalleled diversity'. How can the individual components of identity be isolated and defined in a way that meaningfully reflects each country's unique identity? Its geography? Then why have Britain's islands given it such a different character from Japan's? Its faith? Has Catholicism given Mexico and Italy similar identities? Obviously not. Institutions? Parliamentary democracies vary widely. What gives each nation the distinct identity which everyone recognises but finds so hard to define, is actually the infinitely rich and complex way all these things interact and, critically, how they interact through the passage of time and events.

So what does this mean for history in our education system? It suggests, I think, that we have not paid enough strategic attention to its role at a time when national identity is so important to our politics, and history is so important to our national identity. It is an academic discipline which can teach us very important intellectual skills, but it is so much more than that. I believe this needs to be incorporated more systematically into our education system.

So in conclusion, I would like to suggest three immediate issues to place on the public policy agenda. First, we are entering a new era in higher education, and, as the consequences of recent legislative changes unfold, politicians must not lose sight of the importance of history.

Now when the previous Secretary of State for Education Charles Clark was asked in a commons committee about the recent closure of chemistry courses at [Exeter University](#), he spoke of the need to protect certain subjects in the new environment for higher education. He said that it might be appropriate 'to intervene to strengthen or secure courses of national strategic significance', and he listed five courses. History was not one of them. But I think because of its importance to our sense of ourselves and all that flows from that, history should be one of those courses.

My last two suggestions concern schools. British history should lie at the core of the school curriculum. I am less worried about the number of units occupied by history on the timetable, but there must be a core component of history in schools, and I certainly do not think that the study of history should restrict itself to our own national story. Although there is currently a significant component of British history in the curriculum, it veers towards the permissive rather than the compulsory. It is, for example, possible to drop history altogether at 14, and possible under one exam board to do AS level history without studying any British history; I think that this permissive attitude should stop. A significant component of British history should be included at all levels of history in schools, and history should be studied to 16 - on that, at least, I do agree with Tim Collins.

And third, I believe that this study of British history should be broadened. Of course our political history is important and so too is our social history. However, if we approach the question of content from a different angle, from a politician's angle, not so much in terms of the intellectual skills and disciplines that it teaches, but in terms of its importance to our national identity today, other subjects for study present themselves. What place, for example, is there in our history curriculum for studying our system of common law and how it has evolved? Or, conspicuously, our language; the transcendent glory of the English language is one of the most important defining influences on how we see ourselves as a nation and the opulent variety of its wellsprings respects the splendid complexity of our inheritance, casting new and important light on it.

In his attack on curriculum reforms five years ago, Eric Evans complained that

it might be thought that politicians might have a clearer idea of what studying British history was for, not so. The Government is willing to wound by jeopardising a number of coherent and successful syllabuses, but afraid to strike by imposing its own vision of British history and testing how intelligent 18 year olds understand Britishness.

I do not think that is altogether fair. The prime minister Tony Blair and, in particular, the chancellor of the exchequer Gordon Brown have given many speeches over the years on their vision of Britishness, and there have been clear implications, for example, in the Mr Brown's 1997 *Spectator* Lecture of what this might mean for the studying of British history. However, I accept that this has not yet percolated through into the curriculum and it should. But the idea that Eric Evans floats, that such a vision of Britishness should be 'imposed' by politicians, should be anathema to everybody. Our national identity is too important and too precious to be imposed by anyone in such a way. In order to prevent that, we need to institutionalise a continuing discussion about it. Recently Gordon Brown proposed that an Institute of Britishness be set up. What better task with which to launch itself than by creating a forum, including educationalists but stretching beyond them, to bring in all those with a proper interest in the issue, to develop that discussion about the place that history should occupy in our system of education. History: the deposits of time are the foundations of the world in which we live.

Notes

1. 'In defence of history', *The Guardian*, 15 Jan. 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,1390980,00.html> [accessed 2 Aug. 2005]. [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. Full text of Tim Collins's speech to the National Catholic Heads Conference, *The Guardian*, 27 Jan. 2005 <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,5500,1400154,00.html> [accessed 2 Aug. 2005]. [Back to \(2\)](#).
3. F. Braudel, *The Identity of France* (trans. Sian Reynolds, 2 vols., 1988-90). [Back to \(3\)](#).
4. S. Hartington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York and London, 2004). [Back to \(4\)](#).

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