

IN MARCH 2013 GRANT BAGE ASKED SIX CURRICULAR QUESTIONS OF ENGLISH EDUCATION'S SECRETARY OF STATE. HE NEVER REPLIED...

The letter to Michael Gove, pages 2-5 below, started life as a formal submission to England's Department for Education in March 2013. It was in response to highly controversial government proposals (spearheaded and advocated by Mr. Gove) to change the English National Curriculum in History. After three weeks the Secretary of State had not replied to the letter, so as a blog the article was disseminated by the Cambridge Primary Review website (though those links are now broken), Twitter and elsewhere. [Controversy about Gove's proposed curriculum](#) raged through broadsheets, University common rooms and amongst teachers via [TES](#) discussion threads:

Forgive me if this link has already been posted.

http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/_news/2013/03/Grant%20Bage%20asks%20six%20leading%20question%20on%2013%20March%202013.pdf

- 1. I hope that Mr Bage publishes the reply from the Secretary of State for education. I am sure he is fully aware that the proposed History curriculum has been devised by Civitas and is just playing devil's advocate.*

[snowyhead](#), Apr 6, 2013

- 1. Brilliant letter from Mr Bage...Thanks for the reference. [FolkFan](#), Apr 6, 2013*

Despite public DfE protestations that nothing needed to change, behind the scenes it did. Revised proposals were published in April 2013. By July 2013, as this [blog](#) from Imaginative Enquiry concluded, some teachers at least could find a way through the fog; and were starting to use the new National Curriculum in history in creative ways. But Michael Gove's increasing unpopularity prompted David Cameron in July 2014 to replace Gove as education secretary and demote him to the Whips Office. By July 2015 Gove had recovered to become Lord Chancellor, Secretary of State for Justice, a leader of Brexit and even an aspirant prime minister. In July 2016 he was once again sacked and sent to the backbenches by Theresa May.

Meanwhile teachers, teaching assistants, families, schools, museums, writers, the media and the wider heritage sector continue with the everyday work of their careers: educating children through questions, evidence, imagination and stories, about how life may have been lived in the past.

13 March 2013

Dear Secretary of State,

There have been numerous comments flying around the media recently, about the DFE's draft proposals for the National Curriculum in history. Teachers, parents, professors, politicians and history enthusiasts have been erudite and passionate in their arguments. What I write here draws on that debate but also asks you, Secretary of State, to answer some individual questions as education's political leader. Please consider these alongside formal evidence from the 'DFE consultation'.

Any educator who cares about history knows that you do too, genuinely and with sustained commitment: but does your department's proposed curriculum stand up to examination? I am confident that you would be able to answer the questions posed below under exam conditions, on your own and without the assistance of political advisers, civil servants, the Internet or a calculator. Although the constraints of your diary will perhaps not permit us to set that process in place, the significance of the issues remains:

Authorship

England's first National Curriculum was instigated by a Conservative government in 1988 and has been updated ever since. Every previous administration has approached that development through openly appointed, individually named and democratically accountable groups containing representative people and deep expertise. Such accountability has been particularly important in a subject as sensitive and influential as history. Unfortunately it appears that the administration of which you are a prominent leader, has arrived at its version of the history curriculum in a different way. From beyond Whitehall the impression persists that the government has been covert and even secretive about the processes through which the curriculum is being shaped. This contradicts your reputation as a committed, argumentative democrat and an advocate of open government. Please could you therefore tell us:

Precisely which people authored this draft curriculum and what process produced it?

Authenticity

It does not take long to write 1,515 words, which is the precise length of the proposed curriculum and the rough length of this article; but the public is intrigued as to what sources underpin its construction. Given the general anonymity of its authors and the obscure processes they have employed, this is of democratic significance and huge practical importance. A curriculum in all respects should have convincing claims to classroom authenticity. A curriculum is a plan on a massive scale, to occupy millions of learning hours each day. Each minute, of every learner's life, in all our schools is of immense value; and their time once wasted, is lost forever. Any curriculum underpinning the precious expenditure of children's time

must be authentically teachable and learnable from start to finish. Since you are the elected head of this country's most important industry, education, I therefore ask another simple question:

What practical experience and compelling educational evidence suggest that this history curriculum will work in classrooms?

Questions

My father and grandfather are in this history curriculum. As democratic Conservatives they served with pride, in the citizen armies of World Wars One and Two. From toiling down a mine in 1911 my grandfather volunteered for the army. He rode motorbikes between trenches, fought in tank battles and embodied the resultant shrapnel to his dying day. Meanwhile in 1940 and aged 14, my father left his Aberdeenshire School. He worked at first, joined the Air Training Corps and then flew 35 missions as a rear gunner in Bomber Command between 1944 and 1945. He was lucky to survive; but together as a family, in June 2012 we witnessed the unveiling of a national memorial to the Bomber Command crews killed, lost or injured in action. That amounted to nearly half of them. As if those deaths did not cause grief enough, for nearly 70 years Bomber Command survivors carried and campaigned around a heart rending and historical question: why was the sacrifice of their comrades consistently ignored by politicians? Why did Britain turn its back for so long, on the volunteer heroes whose grim actions did so much to win the war against Fascism?

My father and grandfather believed that they fought for liberty in their wars, to sustain a Britain free from unquestioning obedience. That belief may or may not be accurate: but the asking of such difficult questions is the very substance of history. This begs an important explanation from you, as both a patriot and a passionate believer in education:

Why has your Department offered the English people a national curriculum in history, devoid of a single question?

Enquiry

In 2013 it seems that you cannot switch on the television, without catching a show about history. Whether viewing a celebrity in an archive blubbing over ancestors, or a car park proffering the bones of a king: popular history is in a golden age. It is hardly controversial to claim that history as a discipline has never been more widespread or appealing. Any reasonable person might argue for a connection between this current success and the previous 20 years of history teaching and learning, via the current curriculum. It appears that much has gone well in our schools for two decades, given the subject's rude cultural health. Since popular historical enquiries now grip people's curiosity and excite the public imagination:

Why does this 2013 history curriculum fail to include a single instance of the words curiosity, enquiry or imagination?

Autonomy

A respected foundation of your approach to education has been the aim to set teachers free from national diktats and curricular constraints; and to maximise the creative autonomy of teachers. This is especially interesting in the case of history. Let us take Key Stage 2 of the proposed curriculum as an example, which orders that 'pupils should be taught the ... chronology of British history sequentially' beginning with 'early Britons and settlers'. At face value this could result in over half a million seven year olds and tens of thousands of teachers, starting each September in the same curricular place. Approximately 45 months later these lucky millions will finish their journey via a soft summer landing into 'the Glorious Revolution, constitutional monarchy and the Union of the Parliaments.' Less prescriptively of content, during Key Stage 1 all English five and six year olds will 'be taught about ... the concept of a nation and a nation's history' alongside 'concepts such as civilisation, monarchy, parliament, democracy ...'

What part does a curriculum detailing term-by-term content of lessons, or specifying political concepts to be taught to infants, play in a system that celebrates teachers' autonomy?

Practicality

One of the most important features of Conservatism as a political philosophy, or so as lifelong Conservatives my father and grandfather taught me, was its practicality. The Conservatives they campaigned with or voted for would, they promised me, implement common sense policies for the 'real world'. A true Conservative in their eyes would never waste money, prioritise ideology or introduce change for change's sake. Taking the proposed national curriculum in history as a modest case study of modern Conservatism in action; my grandfather would assume that, when public funds are so short, the cost-benefit analysis of such radical changes had been carefully budgeted. For example over the last two decades our schools and successive national governments have invested significant time and money, in developing the current national curriculum in history. Yet your Department's proposals will change nearly everything in that curriculum, particularly for primary schools, and run the considerable risk of losing much that has been gained. From a 2013 perspective and knowing how important international comparisons have become in educational policy making, I would hope that these draft proposals might have been benchmarked as internationally excellent, when compared to the curriculum development of other countries. Drawing from practical work experience and plain commonsense, I would expect to see a clear and practical plan of how the DfE will go about the crucial task of motivating, organising and retraining as necessary the work and volunteer forces of nearly one million people who will teach, lead or govern not just the history elements, but the *whole* of this new national

curriculum. You are the elected leader of education in this country and therefore it seems reasonable to ask:

How will primary teachers in particular be trained, prepared and supported during the next year, to ensure this curriculum experiment will succeed for each child in their care?

It only remains for me to wish you the best of luck with your examination against these six key questions. The written test will be short of course, three hours and no retakes. The 'practical' will be much longer. The national curriculum in history your department has proposed may persist for years. It has the potential to far outlast your own career as Secretary of State for Education, and will either enrich or burden millions of children. As a parent, governor, taxpayer and educator I therefore hope this curriculum will go down in history, for all the right reasons: and that any reply to this letter may help, in some small way, to contribute to that very important process.

With kind regards,

Grant Bage

Dr. Grant Bage has written many books and articles about the teaching and learning of history and is an honorary fellow of the Historical Association. This letter was written in a personal capacity.