

Essay:

Flying the flag for mainstream Australia

Author:

Anna Clark

In June 2004, the Prime Minister, John Howard, and the former Federal Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, announced a new \$31 billion federal education package in which funding would be tied to a National Values Framework.¹ The increased government support would be contingent on the implementation of several policy initiatives “that will underpin the Australian Government’s national priorities, shaping our schools over the next decade”. These requirements included two hours of compulsory exercise for students every week, adoption of a national safe-schools framework and installation of a “functioning flagpole” to fly the Australian flag. “This is a major investment in Australia’s future,” their joint media release promised. “It will leave us better equipped to face the global future and help us build on our long traditions of innovation and technical excellence.”²

While it was not made clear exactly how the teaching and learning of these values might be undertaken, their importance was obvious: they would educate the nation, there would be reporting measures to ensure schools were being held accountable, and they were intrinsic to “Australia’s future”. The initiative was designed to support greater national consistency in schooling, such as a standard school starting age and the promotion of educational standards. “Better reporting to parents”, “transparency of school performance”, and “making values a core part of schooling” framed the policy. Moreover, “every school must have a functioning flagpole, fly the Australian flag and display the values framework in a prominent place in the school, as a condition of funding”.³

The “core values” and “flagpoles” push came five months after the Prime Minister had criticised Australian state schools for being “too politically correct and too values-neutral”.⁴ He claimed that students were leaving the public-school system because it failed to promote “mainstream” Australian values. The acting Minister for Education, Peter McGauran, explained the Government’s position: “There is a growing trend that is discernible to parents that too many government schools are either value-free or are

hostile or apathetic to Australian heritage and values," he said. "Parents, a great many of them, are worried by a trend within some government schools away from the values that they want imparted to their children." ⁵

Many Australians supported the Government's public commitment. On the ABC online forum, "husky65" maintained that the move would encourage Australian patriotism. "I don't see a problem with giving proud Australian kids a chance to express that pride. I can see why a bitter, leftist teachers' union would be opposed to such a basic idea though." ⁶ Another, "proud2baussie", agreed the initiative was a positive one: "To dismiss this great idea is moronic. I totally support the concept and am proud to be Australian and show our symbols with pride." ⁷ Robert Buick wrote to *The Gold Coast Bulletin* and complained, "Some Australians object to the flying of the nation's flag within government precincts including schools. To them I say this, 'What's your heritage and why live here if you don't support our national emblem?' All nations fly their flag proudly and so should we." ⁸

Others were far from convinced.

Polly Price wrote to *The Sydney Morning Herald* and suggested that the Prime Minister "make the overweight kids shin up the flagpole daily. That should do it." ⁹ Fiona Buchanan was more critical in *The Age*: "John Howard, education should not have conditions. It is essential, with or without a functioning flagpole." ¹⁰ A number of politicians also wondered how Australian values would be advanced by flying the nation's flag in schools. NSW Labor Premier, Bob Carr, suggested that the Federal Government would foster more patriotism by funding a "core library" in every school of history, geography and culture "than buying a flagpole". ¹¹ Meanwhile, in Canberra, the Capital Territory's Minister for Education, Katy Gallagher, and then Democrats senator, Aden Ridgeway, claimed that regulations on flying the national flag would prevent schools flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags to promote reconciliation. A spokesperson for Brendan Nelson said that, while the Commonwealth would contribute \$1,500 for each school to receive a single flagpole, multiple flagpoles would have to be paid for by the school. ¹²

The significance of this debate is not in determining the worth of the Australian flag, or even the legitimacy of Australian values *per se*, but the ways in which these national symbols have been co-opted into a divisive and politicised contest over Australia's identity. This alignment of educational values with the values of the nation itself is the latest outbreak of the so-called "history wars" – a dispute over Australian heritage and identity that has been played out over history books and syllabuses, national commemorations and public institutions around the country. And it is contingent on a troubling paradox: the rhetoric of national unity and pedagogical standards that has

characterised the development of the values framework implicitly capitalises on perceived divisions in Australian society (us/them, Australian/unAustralian, and so forth). The nationalisation of teaching so-called “values” is a potent political manoeuvre, but one that rests on a construction of unified national identity premised on division.

The language that shaped the development of the values framework has characterised the discourse of the Coalition since it campaigned for the federal election in 1996. Then, John Howard loudly opposed what he felt had been a left-wing domination of Australia’s story under the Labor government of Paul Keating and, instead, promised to govern for “all of us”. Like the values framework, Howard’s “all of us” invoked a shared Australian identity, and it was used alongside similarly vague collectives, such as “mainstream Australia”. It also became an astute conservative slogan that played off social anxieties for political gain; as Noel Pearson contended, it implied an Australia “for all of us (but not them)”. ¹³

The political effort to reclaim Australia’s story on behalf of the “mainstream” has been particularly critical in schools – a vital site for defining and reproducing the national narrative. As a guest on the program of the talkback radio host John Laws soon after his government’s election, Howard denounced history curricula that presented students with an apparently biased version of their past. A number of syllabuses used “invasion” to describe the colonisation of Australia by Europeans, and had begun to include information about the “stolen generations” – the term used to describe the forcible removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from their families by governments and agencies from the late nineteenth century until the second half of the twentieth century. “To tell children whose parents were not part of that treatment,” he contended, “to tell children who themselves have been no part of it, that we’re all part of it, that we’re part of a sort of racist and bigoted history, is something that Australians reject.”¹⁴ The word “invasion”, he maintained, should never have been in the syllabus in the first place.¹⁵

Three years later, Howard reiterated his belief that children should not be made to feel guilty about Australia’s colonial past. He said it was wrong to impose a “politically correct version of history” on children and make them say sorry in class for past wrongs. Young pupils would not understand what they were doing, Howard said, and should not apologise for the actions of previous generations. “I have a rather old-fashioned, but I think valid, view, that you apologise for things for which you are responsible,” he said.¹⁶ Howard’s historical approach needs to be examined here, for he effectively sanctions a particular version of Australia’s past at the expense of any contrasting narratives. Such a view holds that Australia’s history is “our history”. Meanwhile “their” history, to reinvoke Pearson, is dismissed as marginal and extreme.

It is not enough to simply dismiss the development of the values framework as conservative polemic. As much of the response revealed, the development and implementation of national values for schools generated considerable public support. The desire to teach a cohesive narrative and identity in schools is a deeply held conviction for many Australians. Nevertheless, the government strategy to capitalise on such anxieties and national desires is significant, and it reveals a cogent effort on its part to define, and then appease, “mainstream Australia” over a range of potentially divisive and contested images.

The conjecture over the values framework and installation of functioning flagpoles in schools reanimated the wider anxiety over the history wars. Government calls to strengthen the teaching of Australian heritage and values were represented in the media over many months and became a heated public issue. To be sure, the contested connections between national identity and education are certainly telling: the argument for defining core values sees Australian identity being forged through its history; “our children”, meanwhile, are a powerful symbol of its future.

But what happens when “our citizens of tomorrow” are barely aware of their rights and responsibilities as Australians? Anxiety over teaching Australian heritage and identity has been bolstered by concern that children do not know enough about their national history or political institutions. In the lead-up to the Centenary of Federation in 2001, various surveys revealed that more Australians knew the presidents of the United States than Australia’s own leaders. Only 36 per cent of respondents could identify Edmund Barton as an Australian politician and fewer than 45 per cent could respond when asked what Federation meant.¹⁷ In the context of such apparently grave national illiteracy, the Government’s push to prescribe Australia’s values became even more critical.

Yet moves to teach these values deemed beyond dispute continued to be dogged by just that. When McGauran warned against the “jettisoning of traditional values and the heritage of Australia”, he noted that a school in Western Australia had cancelled its Anzac Day celebrations. And he added that some schools in Victoria and NSW had banned nativity plays because few of the children in those schools came from Christian backgrounds. Despite the sentiment of national coherence, then, discussion surrounding the values framework revealed how contested expressions of national identity and history really are. The controversy surrounding the framework belied its rhetoric of national co-operation, accountability and values.

Following the London terrorist bombings in 2005, Brendan Nelson relaunched the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools, and set out the nine values for Australian students: care and compassion; doing your best; fair go; freedom; honesty and trustworthiness; integrity; respect; responsibility; and understanding, tolerance and inclusion.

Furthermore, Nelson designed a poster of the values “and over the top of it”, he said, “I’ve superimposed Simpson and his donkey as an example of what’s at the heart of our national sense of emerging identity”.¹⁸ The story of the unarmed digger and his donkey rescuing wounded soldiers at Gallipoli was the stuff of legend, “and he represents everything that’s at the heart of what it means to be an Australian”.¹⁹

According to Nelson, essential Australian values emerged not just from its history but its myths, and if schools were not persuaded by the likes of Simpson (or his donkey), they should reconsider their place in Australian society. “If you want to be in Australia, if you want to raise your children in Australia, we fully expect those children to be taught and to accept Australian values and beliefs,” Nelson maintained. “We want them to understand our history and our culture, the extent to which we believe in mateship and giving another person a hand up and a fair go. Basically, if people don’t want to be Australians and they don’t want to live by Australian values and understand them, well, basically, they can clear off.”²⁰

As we have seen in debates over the history wars, the official desire to define Australia’s identity is nothing new – and the co-option of national myths such as Simpson’s to supplement “Australia’s story” are surely part of that official construction of national character.²¹ What stands out in the values framework is the way the Government tied education funding to its implementation; and, further, the way it used a rhetoric of national cohesion and educational accountability to justify the prescription of national values in schools. Values such as compassion and integrity are laudable. Even the ideals of mateship and heroism in the Simpson story have important lessons. The limitations of the framework are contained in the discourse that sustains it – in particular, the insistence on an Australian identity that is unique and innate. The development of the values revealed an explicit appeal to national unity in the face of mounting tension over Australian identity.

Ultimately, the push to define Australian values and prescribe them in schools was far from consensual. Muslim schools furiously defended their existing curriculum approach, and insisted that they already taught Australian values to their students. Silma Ihram, the principal of the Noor Al Houda Islamic College in Sydney, said that “every community has to prove their value to Australian society and our students are doing that”.²² In other words, it is not the teaching of values to Australian children that is intrinsically

problematic but how these values have been used politically to bolster an interpretation of Australian identity that is at once universal and exclusive.

“We want them to understand our history and our culture,” Nelson demanded.²³ But who are “we”, and what is “ours”? This insistence on Simpson and a functioning flag pole as proud expressions of Australian identity revealed just how restricted the values framework had become. Indeed, the heated response to this debate illuminates its real tension: namely, the unifying impulse to teach national history, narrative and identity, and the explicitly contested nature of such ideas. ■

¹ *Values Education Study Final Report* (Carlton South, Vic: Curriculum Corporation, 2003); *A Draft National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* (Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004); Andrew Fraser, “Parents fly the way on poles”, *Canberra Times*, June 29, 2004.

² John Howard and Brendan Nelson, “The Australian Government’s Agenda for Schools – Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity” (Brendan Nelson Media Centre, 2004).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mark Riley, Linda Doherty and Kelly Burke, “Backlash over PM’s attack on public schools”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 21, 2004. See also: Editorial, “An uneducated guess about school values”, *The Age*, January 22, 2004.

⁵ Cited in Chee Chee Leung, Orietta Guerrero, with Annabel Crabb, “Private, public schools hit PM”, *The Age*, January 21, 2004; Riley, “Backlash over PM’s attack on public schools”.

⁶ *ABC Online Forum* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, June 23, 2004 [cited July 20, 2004]); available from <http://www2b.abc.net.au/news/forum/newsonline1/archives/archive29/default.shtm>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Robert Buick, letter, *The Gold Coast Bulletin*, June 26, 2004.

⁹ Polly Price, letter, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 1, 2004.

¹⁰ Fiona Buchanan, letter, *The Age*, June 26, 2004.

¹¹ Bob Carr, Welcome Address (paper presented at Visions: 12th Biennial National Conference of the Australian Historical Association, Newcastle, July 5-9, 2004).

¹² “Too few poles to go round under protocols”, *Canberra Times*, June 23, 2004.

¹³ *The Australian*, November 22, 1996.

¹⁴ Cited in Judith Brett, *The Age*, November 8, 1996.

¹⁵ Editorial, “An invasion indeed”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 26, 1995.

¹⁶ Clinton Porteous, “Pupils should not say sorry, says PM”, *The Herald Sun*, June 5, 1999.

¹⁷ “Students ignorant of history”, *The Courier-Mail*, October 16, 2000.

¹⁸ Samantha Hawley, “Brendan Nelson addresses Islamic schools on Australian values”, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2005/s1445094.htm> (accessed September 22, 2005).

¹⁹ Ben Haywood, “Battlelines drawn on values”, *The Age*, September 5, 2005; Samantha Hawley, “Teach Australian values or ‘clear off’, says Nelson”, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2005/s1445262.htm> (accessed September 22, 2005).

²⁰ Cited in Matthew Pinkney, “Values, by jingoism!”, *The Herald Sun*, August 29, 2005.

²¹ Peter Cochrane, *Simpson and the Donkey: The Making of a Legend* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1992).

²² Lillian Saleh, “We are good Aussies – Muslim schools defend the values they teach”, *The Daily Telegraph*, August 25, 2005.

²³ My emphasis.