

Christopher Hill examines new proposals for the history curriculum

# Blind Dates



**T**he report of the government-appointed History Working Group was published last month. It proposes a curriculum for schools which will make history 'challenging, relevant and interesting', 'to help to understand the present in the context of the past', 'to give pupils an understanding of their own cultural roots and shared inheritances'. Alongside five chunks of *British* (not merely English) history and four of European history including Britain, it proposes alternative subjects and optional extras covering China, India, Japan and Africa, ships and seamen through history and nearly 30 other subjects. From all this pupils should attain 'a critically sharpened intelligence with which to make sense of current affairs'. No more memorising of English kings, battles and parliaments: an exhilarating prospect.

Not unexpectedly, the politicians were continually breathing down necks, calling for more testing on facts, more English history. The group stuck determinedly to its guns. 'Names, dates and places provide only the starting-point for understanding', without which 'history is reduced to parrot learning, and assessment to a parlour memory game'. They saw dangers of 'a step down the road to an "official history"'. 'There will always be those who seek to impose a particular view of society through an interpretation of history'. (Such perhaps as Mrs Thatcher's idea that the Magna Carta barons invented the rights of man, and that 1688 had something to do with democracy.)

History must train 'future citizens of a democracy', in which 'change is inherent'. Teachers should 'offer pupils a balanced presentation of opposing views', so that they can think for themselves, and understand that there are 'no monopolies of truth'. To explain how Britain became what it is today, history must be studied from many standpoints - rich and poor, men and women, different ethnic groups and ideologies. Comparative study of other countries will put British history in perspective.

The group had to accept the government's mania for assessment. But it insisted - despite much pressure - that 'assessment must be the servant of teaching, not its master'. 'Historical knowledge as information must be assessed ... in the only way that invests it with meaning: in context.' Teachers

can assess pupils far better than outside tests. The government's climb-down on testing removes one obstacle to implementation of the report, at whose wisdom I have been able only to hint. An interim report was 'overwhelmingly welcomed' by readers - presumably mostly schoolteachers.

I have never taught history in a school. Conveying a sense of its excitement and relevance to unenthusiastic youngsters must be extremely difficult, calling for imagination and intensive preparation. Schoolteachers can never be paid enough. They need no patronising advice from university teachers, whose job is so different and so much softer.

A self-appointed group calling itself the History Curriculum Association has apparently secured the right to be consulted on the final report, I do not know why or how. In its name, Professor Robert Skidelsky has circulated a manifesto together with a document signed (among others) by several be-knighted and be-lorded historians. Skidelsky uses emotive language to denounce 'the new history', 'largely set in train by schoolteachers and educationalists' (how dreadful!) because of its 'hostility to British history and to knowledge'. Skidelsky dislikes assessment, but primarily because it 'prevents the testing of knowledge as such' - ie, kings, dates, etc. He is rightly concerned lest able pupils are encouraged to give up history at age 14. But his main demands are those which the government has been pressing on the working group - more facts and more British history. No doubt this is a coincidence, but it is an ominous coincidence.

This exciting report's strength is its basis in practical schoolteaching experience. But its proposals will require new textbooks and materials and the training of new teachers. Plenty of grounds here for shelving or emasculating the report. Teachers (school and university) may have to fight for the implementation in its entirety of this imaginative and far-sighted report. •