

# New Zealand History

Submission to Ministry of Education on the proposed curriculum

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I am writing to comment on the consultation draft "Aotearoa New Zealand's Histories in the New Zealand Curriculum".

I write as someone who strongly supports the teaching of New Zealand history in our schools (and who, incidentally, regrets how little New Zealand history I was taught in my own time in New Zealand state schools) and who welcomes the prospect of New Zealand history becoming a standard aspect of the schooling of our children.

That said, the proposed curriculum document is highly unsatisfactory, on a number of counts.

First, and although the focus is on young children (from age 5 to those at the end of year 10 just turning 15) there is no sense in the curriculum of any continuous narrative. Providing such a basic outline of our history should be a basic in any history curriculum of this sort, which (sadly) represents almost all the formal history study most students will ever do. No one, taught solely using this curriculum, will emerge with a rough sense of, for example, (a) the migration of Maori to these islands, (b) their settlement, their impact on the land, and their society, religion, economics, (c) the interface with more advanced technologies that connected these islands with the rest of the world, (d) the evangelisation of New Zealand and the key role of the Church Missionary Society, (e) key figures in early modern New Zealand history, (f) the economic development - including large-scale immigration - that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had New Zealand as one of the highest income countries on earth, (g) the gradual process that led to New Zealand political independence. (h) the high rates of Maori-European intermarriage, and (i) key political figures (good and ill) of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Names and dates may be out of fashion - and they can be over-emphasised in the inevitable limited teaching time available - but they help provide a structure for beginning to organise thinking about historical events and times.

Second, there is no sense of the wider world of which the New Zealand story (particularly since 1642/1769 or whichever date one focuses on) has been a part. A significant element of pre-European New Zealand was its remarkable isolation - Maori having settled here some centuries earlier there was no evidence of ongoing contact with other societies in the Pacific (themselves typically small and isolated) and with no international trade at all. It was an astonishing degree of isolation. The European age of exploration and discovery opened these islands to the world, and the world to these islands - and had begun to do well before 1840. Whether or not large-scale European settlement ever became a feature of New Zealand, that opening was inevitable and would always have been transformational. And yet there is no hint of it. Similarly, there is no sense of the similarities (and differences, for good and ill) of experiences in Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, Southern Africa, the United States and (beyond the English-speaking world) in southern Latin America or North Africa. None of this can be taught in depth to young kids in a limited time, but it badly distorts the New Zealand story not to refer to them at all. The people of these islands were isolated for several hundred years, but modern New Zealand is not - and for a least a century in the

emergence of modern New Zealand what went on it was in parallel with, often interacting with, experiences in these other places.

Third, there is a strong sense running through the document that a primary purpose of studying history is to judge the past (and those in it) rather than to understand it. Particularly when such young children are the focus, and when the curriculum is designed for use in schools across the country (attended by people of all manner of races, religions, political and ideological views), that focus is misplaced. Understanding needs to precede attempts at judgement/evaluation, but there is no sign - in this document, or elsewhere in the curriculum - of children being equipped with the tools that, as they move into mature adulthood, will allow them to make thoughtful judgements or (indeed, and often) simply to take the past as it was, and understand how it may influence the country we inhabit today. There is little or no sense, for example, that one reasonably be ambivalent about some aspects of the past or that some people might, quite reasonably, evaluate the same facts differently.

Fourth, not only does the document seem to operate in a mode more focused on evaluation and judgement than on understanding, it seems to champion a particular set of judgements, and a particular frame for looking at the history of these islands (evident, as just a small example, in its repeated use of the term "Aotearoa New Zealand", a name with neither historical nor legal standing, even if championed at present by certain parts of the New Zealand public sector). This includes what themes the authors choose to ignore - religion, for example, is not mentioned at all, whether in a Maori context or that of later arrivals, even though religions always (at least) encapsulate key aspects of any culture's understanding of itself, and of its taboos). Economic history hardly gets a mention, even though the exposure to trade, technology, and the economic institutions of leading economies helped dramatically lift average material living standards here, for all groups of inhabitants. Instead, what is presented in one specific story heavily focused on one particular (arguably ahistorical) interpretation and significance of the Treaty of Waitangi. These are contested political issues, on which reasonable people differ, and yet the curriculum document has about it something very much of a single truth. In truth there are a few things about which there is a high measure of agreement today - perhaps the ending of slavery and cannibalism here, under the influence of the gospel and (quite separately) colonial government - and thus a curriculum of this sort will be seen by many (including many parents) as little more than attempts to use the platform of compulsory public schooling as politicised indoctrination. That is both inappropriate, unwise, and unnecessary. And probably not helped by the very limited education in New Zealand education that most teachers have had, increasing the likelihood that what will be conveyed to children will be something more akin to a heavily politicised, nuance-free, (but in the case of most individuals well-meaning) "indoctrination".

If a New Zealand history curriculum is to be anything more than an effort of indoctrination by a group who temporarily hold the commanding heights in the system, this draft should simply be scrapped and the whole process begun again with a clean sheet of paper. Think, for example, about teaching the history of the last 1000 years, and the two primary strands (Maori, and Anglo/European) that have come together to form the modern New Zealand that we - today's citizens - inherit, including confronting the fact (awkward for some) that modern New Zealand is primarily a Western-influenced society and people. Teach about both Maori and European society, strengths, warts, and all, including recognising the ideas and events that made - for example - Britain and north-western Europe (and then its offshoots) not only the wealthiest but the most stable democratic societies. Teach about the challenges, conflicts and opportunities created as those two societies have interacted over the last 250 years. Highlight the key individuals, the events, the

similarities and differences with other settler societies (including the huge exodus of New Zealanders, of all ethnicities, to Australia - more economically successful - in the last 50 years). Teach about secularisation and social change, about the similarities and differences between New Zealand and other advanced countries. But, for the most part, teach facts, teach narrative, teach verifiable stuff, and leave the evaluation for parents, religions, political parties, and for the young people themselves as they emerge into adulthood and - for those interested - more advanced study.