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So Far so Good! History Begins at Home ... and starts with dates, say Politeia's History Panel to Michael Gove's Curriculum

Greater emphasis needed on dates, human agency, religion and the political story.

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The government's new history curriculum has yet to be finalised. But so far the draft has prompted a lively debate amongst historians, teachers and the public.

The plan for pupils to concentrate on the history of this country, from the Romans to Mrs Thatcher, strikes some critics as being too Anglocentric. Others cavil at themes or even phrases which jar on today's politically correct sensibilities.

However, as Politeia's *History in the Making: The New Curriculum, Right or Wrong?* suggests, such criticisms are wide of the mark.

The authors, **Professors David Abulafia, Jonathan Clark and Robert Tombs**,* explain that pupils should study especially the history of their own country for practical as well as cultural reasons. Robert Tombs explains that the study of one country 'is the only way for students to attain sufficient breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding' and the history of the home country is a good place to start. Indeed it is standard practice in similar western countries such as France, Germany and Switzerland.

Chronology, the authors agree, and a wide span of time also matter. The passing of time gives the study of history its structure, as David Abulafia reminds us. History is both about time, 'time in which human beings have lived and acted', and about causes. So one cannot understand events in the British Empire, the Middle East or elsewhere, without looking at their origins. It is also important, as Jonathan Clark reminds us, to acknowledge 'the strangeness of a chronologically distant past.'

The authors therefore welcome the general aims and plan of the proposed curriculum, but suggest how it might be improved. Each includes an individual outline curriculum reflecting the same principles, but with some modifications: in particular, when added together the combined proposals give more emphasis to: -

- dates, continuity and chronological sequence
- human agency
- the need to understand the basic political narrative
- religion

In her Foreword, **Dr Sheila Lawlor**, Director of Politeia and herself an historian, welcomes both the government's proposals and the authors' suggested improvements. She warns, however, that the present exam system of multiple, specified assessment objectives goes contrary to the idea of an outline curriculum – a skeleton which different teachers can flesh out in their various ways. Unless this assessment structure governing GCSEs is reformed, the new curriculum will not achieve Mr Gove's aim of freeing teachers to exercise their professional judgement but will end by entangling them in the very sort of bureaucratic restrictions it was designed to remove.

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