More than just the Henries: Britishness and British history at Key Stage 3

With the first teaching of a revised history curriculum due in September 2008 the debate over content and order is well under way. Robert Guyver, involved in the design of the curriculum development experiment that evolved into the 1991 version of national curriculum history, witnessed the debates about all of the key stages in that crucial year. He now draws on his experience to offer a set of suggestions for the new design. As his personal focus is in primary education, this article is an evaluation of current Key Stage 3 history in the wider context of national curriculum history. Writing in a spirit of debate and discussion, Guyver considers the varying definitions of ‘Britishness’ behind the debate before offering his own, thematic model for the new curriculum.

Whenever there are rumours of imminent changes in the history curriculum a media feeding-frenzy is prompted and there is much criticism of present history and history teaching alongside speculation about how a new curriculum might look. Advisory groups, both official and unofficial, are now mushrooming, and journalists, historians and politicians are pontificating with gravitas.

It is a serious matter to write a national curriculum. It is an intervention strategy backed up by statutory power that has a deep impact on professional autonomy. The structure of a national curriculum inevitably reflects a political interpretation. I still feel a great deal of Angst about my involvement with national curriculum history mark one, and would welcome any opportunity to support systems which allow for more flexibility, though the signs are that flexibility is the last thing on the critics’ minds. What seems to be being proposed is a greater degree of control over teachers’ management of content with more attention to coherence within the narrative. The continuing debate is associated closely with the three main, but overlapping sets of knowledge bases that teachers of history deploy: substantive (content, context, scholarship), syntactic (disciplinary, how connections are made with the nature of history), and pedagogic (relating to the relationships with pupils and how the history is used in the classroom situation).

The current Key Stage 3 curriculum

The current Key Stage 3 curriculum for history corresponds broadly with the criteria for a good history curriculum as set out in History in the Primary and Secondary Years. There is a balance of national, world and local history (though local is embedded rather than separate). The periods studied are long enough to illustrate the dimension of change. There is a balance or at least a mix of chronological periods, though there is less prescribed ancient history than currently required at Key Stage 2. It is at Key Stage 3 that most pupils receive specialist history teaching for the first and often the last time, unless they move on to GCSE and beyond.

Criticisms in the media: obsessions

The specific charges of obsessive history teaching have been that by the end of their history education pupils will have learnt far too much about Henry VIII and his six wives, and about Hitler. The Tudor focus probably relates far more to Key Stage 2, and the Hitler or the ‘Hitlerisation’ critique to GCSE courses. The extension, by implication, of these criticisms is that pupils in schools are not being taught the wider significance of political change in a broader chronological framework, i.e. changes in the sixteenth century or changes in Germany between 1918 and now, and that their attention is being diverted to sensational events or developments because these will have an intrinsic interest.

Key Stage 3, however would seem to be immune from these criticisms. The study of crowns, parliaments and people between 1500 and 1750 (the major political, religious and social changes affecting people throughout the British Isles (including the local area if appropriate)) by no means dwells on Henry VIII. He is not even mentioned in these exemplars, though he could be studied here. The examples give a very wide range of possibilities:

Examples for 9: Britain 1500–1750

Political and religious changes: reformation and religious settlement; relations with other European countries in the sixteenth century; the Plantations in Ireland; religious persecution and the voyage of the Pilgrim Fathers; Charles I and the Civil Wars; Oliver Cromwell and the Commonwealth including relations with Scotland and Ireland; Charles II and the Restoration; Mary, William III and the glorious
Right and the there are the Left, each with its own vision of Britishness, a patriotic model and a democratic model.

Similarly any likelihood of obsession with Hitler and the Nazis at Key Stage 3 is ruled out by the wide focus of the unit criteria. The relevant unit title is a study of some (i.e. not just one) of the significant individuals, events and developments from across the twentieth century, including the two World Wars, the Holocaust, the Cold War, and their impact on Britain, Europe and the wider world.

Examples for 13: a world study after 1900

Individuals: Winston Churchill; Adolf Hitler; Joseph Stalin; Benito Mussolini; Franklin Roosevelt; Mahatma Gandhi; Mao Zedong; and Martin Luther King.

Events: the Western Front in the First World War; the Russian Revolution; the Depression and the New Deal in the USA; the rise of National Socialism in Germany; the emergence of Japan as a major world power; the partition of Ireland and its impact; the rise of modern China; the Vietnam War; the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Developments: the changing role and status of women; the extension of the franchise in Britain and the work of reformers such as Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst; the Welfare State; the origins and role of the United Nations, including the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the break up of the overseas empires of European countries; the origins and development of the Commonwealth and its impact; the development of the European Union; the impact on the lives of people in different parts of the world of changes in the arts, communications, science and technology, such as the work of Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, and of James Watson, Francis Crick, Rosalind Franklin and Maurice Wilkins on the structure of DNA.

At the very end of 2005 it was announced in the media that QCA had addressed the criticism of ‘Hitlerisation’ levelled at the history curriculum and at British attitudes to Germans and to Germany history. A new ‘adapted’ unit had been written: How has Germany moved from division to unity (1945–2000)? This unit has the merit of drawing on a variety of interpretations of this period, includes an up-to-date scholarly, but appropriate booklist, and makes reference to film as well as text. This unit joins a comprehensive list of 22 other schemes for Key Stage 3 history, many of which address issues that are being raised in the media as current concerns (e.g. units 13 and 14 on the British empire and its origins) (See Figure 2).

Criticisms in the media: omissions

Donald MacLeod, writing recently in Education Guardian, highlighted some of the problems associated with redesigning a history curriculum, as history is a territory fought over by competing and conflicting ideologically-motivated groups. Broadly, there are the Right and the Left, each with its own vision of Britishness, a patriotic model and a democratic model, and each with its own reasons for impatience at the pace of change. There does seem to be a consensus about the need for a stronger sense of how we reached where we are now, and an agreement that narrative history offers a very effective solution to this. MacLeod’s article refers to Labour MP Gordon Marsden, a member of the Commons education committee and former editor of History Today, who believes that much more British history should be taught as a basis for promoting citizenship in schools. In the Fabian Review he criticised the ‘Yo Sushi’ experience of historical understanding. ‘With students gobbling titbits as they come round on the module conveyor belt, but able to make little connection to the broader picture’.

Similarly Sir Cyril Taylor, chairman of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust:

… also wants to link history to citizenship. British democracy can be traced back to the Anglo-Saxon Witan, he believes. ‘One of the things that makes this country work is a deep-felt respect for a democratic way of life. I’m not sure some recent immigrant groups have absorbed that ethos. We should ensure all of our children receive basic instruction about how the country became what it is’.4

Although Sir Cyril is undoubtedly driven by the most altruistic motives, care needs to be taken over the use of the word ‘instruction’ which begs questions about how such an approach might impact on history teachers’ own beliefs about the nature of history and how the subject should be taught and learnt. Another view (see Lee below) is that pupils should be empowered to build their own frameworks, because they will vary according to family circumstances, as indeed Sir Cyril implies. According to the late Raphael Samuel ‘the inculcation of correct attitudes is usually self-defeating and hardly compatible with the educational ideal of teaching children to think for themselves.’5 Or as Wrenn writes ‘How much better to teach about the past, but also equip children with the cultural awareness to deconstruct any interpretation for themselves.’6

Nevertheless nagging doubts persist about the power of the present curriculum to offer opportunities to join up the component parts. Professor Martin Daunton, Master of Trinity Hall Cambridge, chair of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, President of the Royal

16 HISTORY 122

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Historical Society, and a member of a DfES advisory group on history, has said, 'There’s a feeling that history has become bitty with no sense of long-term narrative.' It is difficult, however, to equate these criticisms with the curriculum as it stands in Key Stage 3 history.

**Finding a consensus view of Britishness: models of nationhood**

In his survey of trouble-spots of the world, Michael Ignatieff provides a useful analysis of two fundamentally different views of nationhood: the civic and the ethnic. His preferred model is the civic:

Of these two types of nationalism, the civic has a greater claim to sociological realism. Most societies are not mono-ethnic; and even when they are, common ethnicity does not itself obliterate division, because ethnicity is only one of the many claims on an individual’s loyalty. According to the civic nationalist creed, what holds a society together is not common roots but law. By subscribing to a set of democratic procedures and values, individuals can reconcile their right to shape their own lives with their need to belong to a community. This in turn assumes that national belonging can be a form of rational attachment.

Clark writes about primordial popular traditions of nationalism (e.g. Smith) and invented modernistic traditions (e.g. Hobsbawm, Gellner). However, the media seem to be associating the Left with a distaste for imperial history and reluctance to face up to the issues, and the Right with a white supremacist form of ethnic patriotic nationalism, and both are probably extreme interpretations of these positions. Neither would be acceptable as a template for history teachers. The Centre ground needs to be filled with an Ignatieffian civic or democratic interpretation of British history which corresponds with Linda Colley’s vision of a ‘citizen nation’, a view now supported by Gordon Brown.

There are areas of conjunction between the patriotic and the democratic models of the British narrative, though the patriotic approach may see aspects of the greatness of Britain more in military than social, economic or political terms, and may tend to depend on the denigration of other nations to enhance a sense of Britishness. The way forward is likely to be to take the kind of approach adopted in other countries (e.g. Serbia) to British history, to look not at the greatness of Britain, but at Britain as a great power at a certain stage in its history.

These are deep issues, and relate to developing a historical sense of national identity as part of citizenship. Although it can be claimed that they are not unique to Britain as every nation faces the problem of how to present its own psyche in a national history curriculum, those nations that have had empires, colonies or commonwealths do face a particularly difficult balancing act.

Sharon Macdonald has edited a series of reflections and provocations on approaches to European historical consciousness. Included is Jörn Rüsen’s analysis of aspects of ethnocentrism as an element of European historical consciousness, a stern but enlighteningly perceptive critique. Which European nation in hot pursuit of its national historical self-image is not guilty of at least one of his three deadly sins?

1) normative dualism of, or Manicheanism of values (where the positive and normative evaluation of one’s own history is set against the negative evaluation of the history of others);
2) reprojective teleology (an unbroken continuity of one’s own development from origins to relevant projections of the future); (this of course is Whiggism by another name, RG’s note);
3) temporal and spatial centralism (a clear location of one’s own positive development in the centre of history and the corresponding discriminating marginalization of others).

Joke van der Leeuw reaffirms this view:

The wish to develop a national consciousness of the past also entails a third problem. The building of such consciousness is very much based on those elements that made the nation or state unique, rather than on those elements which were shared with neighbours or other nations. As a consequence, pupils were and are taught about national particularities, even though these may in fact be regional or even global experiences.

This theme was developed by Bodo von Borries in his chapter on narrating European history, in which he points out the neglect of Orthodox, Byzantine, and Islamic traditions in the dominance of the influence of Western Europe in European Historical Consciousness. An obsession with the history of success tends to neglect errors, failures and crimes of Europeans.

Therefore, I plead that we dispense with widespread well-known uniform ‘master narratives’, especially national ones. History should be presented as ‘historical anthropology’ of an ‘animal not yet fixed and defined’. This is the only way of understanding human beings in their immense capability for metamorphosis, change and alteration in their extraordinary readiness to undertake extreme action and suffering. Therefore, I conclude that history must also – though not exclusively – be approached as micro-history of everyday life.

The attitude to Germany may be a case in point, and this model may be characterised by an exceptionalist view of British history. The mythic episode of resisting attacks by Nazi Germany in 1940 cannot always
be used as a template for British uniqueness and greatness, though Overy describes the Allied victory that was the actual outcome of World War II as ‘unpredictable.’ Britain’s ability to withstand an invasion can be seen as having long-term significance for the future of Europe as Britain became the launching pad for further military activity which, with the efforts of other Allies such as the Russians and Americans, did lead to the defeat of Nazi Germany, with tragic effects for the German civilian population. The communist regimes did not collapse until later, as the new QCA scheme shows, but could be seen (like the Nazi era) as temporary breaches in European developments.

Jonathan Clark identifies exceptionalism as a characteristic of some historiographical approaches to British and indeed to U.S. history. Seeing British history as exceptional to the Western or European norm has caused some tensions, and he devotes a chapter to discussing how there has been a re- alignment between British history and European history, especially since 1945. Recently, those central European states which have been newly incorporated into the EU (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary) have complained about the way they were described in the EU budget negotiations in 2005 as Eastern Europe. As far as they were concerned they had shared the main movements of European history: Christianisation, the feudal system, the Reformation, the ancien régime, and the Enlightenment.

The Left suspects the patriotic model because in the past it has been associated with the Whig Interpretation, and tended to be insensitive in its glorification of aspects of imperial rule. It is not a purely British problem. According to Le Monde, President Chirac decided early in 2006 to repeal an article in the law which required French schools to teach the benefits of colonial rule. Both the Left and the Right want children to know about the Empire and there is some common ground. Marsden advised:

We need to acknowledge, and overcome, a certain weariness about teaching British history. Teaching a rounded history of the rise and fall of Britain’s empire has often been regarded as too complex or divisive in our multi-ethnic classrooms – despite the important themes and links it offers. We can now see that history from all sides and see how it has made us who we are today.

Old attitudes such as those found in Henrietta Marshall’s Our Empire Story, stories of India and the greater colonies, told to children are outdated as history and as interpretations and reflect the attitudes of the Edwardian times when it was written. However historians can help with fresh interpretations. Good history should be the basis for curriculum design, and good curriculum design can lead to good history teaching. The clash between the patriotic and democratic schools of British narrative history is as pointless as the old quarrel between the content and skills proponents. It is unlikely that the DfES/QCA will, before the next General Election, agree to curriculum changes that reflect a right-wing view of history. It is more likely that historians will be encouraged or even appointed to work together to produce a discussion document about British history and the history of the British Empire that seeks for broad consensus across academia. For teachers a good starting point would be the four volumes of the Oxford History of the British Empire, the Cambridge Illustrated History of the British Empire, Peter Marshall’s The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India and America c. 1750-1783. Maria Misra’s Penguin History of Modern India 1859 to the present will make a valuable contribution to the debate.

These texts could balanced with Paul Gilroy’s two works: The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness and After Empire: melancholia or convivial culture?

How can these proposed changes be implemented across the key stages?

It is important to remember that, for many pupils, the experience of history education will end at 14 and that therefore any enhancing of a sense of narrative about British history (including awareness of the British empire) has to be achieved between the ages of 7 and 14. Also important to bear in mind is that between the ages of 7 and 11 children will be taught mainly by non-specialists often without even a GCSE in the subject whose own subject knowledge confidence with British history may be lacking. Primary teachers have to cope with 11 subjects and cannot be expected to have the equivalent of specialist knowledge in all of them. It is also possible that some primary teachers may have been trained in an institution which took the choice (in the Government’s own Standards for Teacher Training for primary) between geography and history literally, offering no history. Government agencies involved with writing these Standards must have assumed that a primary school’s history or humanities co-ordinator would take on the responsibility for continuing or even starting the training of newly qualified teachers. In reality, however, many teacher training institutions still offer both geography and history to their students, and most primary teachers will rise to challenge of teaching the history units with all of the professionalism at their disposal.

Policy, templates and other aspects of Britishness

Of course Key Stage 3 history is for pupils aged between 11 and 14, that difficult time of life when adolescence kicks in, and interest in historical matters can wane. Any teacher has to grapple with the real issue of meaningfulness, and constitutional developments have a low rating in this respect, unless taught with lively engagement.
# Key Stage 3 History

## Britain 1066-1500
A study of major features of Britain’s medieval past: the development of the monarchy, and significant events and characteristic features of the lives of people living throughout the British Isles, including the local area if appropriate.

## Britain 1500-1750
A study of crowns, parliaments and people: the major political, religious and social changes affecting people throughout the British Isles, including the local area if appropriate.

## Britain 1750-1900
A study of how expansion of trade and colonisation, industrialisation and political changes affected the United Kingdom, including the local area.

## A European study before 1914
A study of a significant period or event in the prehistory or history of Europe.

## A world study before 1900
A study of the cultures, beliefs and achievements of an African, American, Asian or Australasian society in the past (other than those included in the programme of study for Key Stage 2).

## A world study after 1900
A study of some of the significant individuals, events and developments from across the twentieth century, including the two World Wars, the Holocaust, the Cold War, and their impact on Britain, Europe and the wider world.
The current most significant Government policy is Every Child Matters (2003), and this is likely to play an important part in any curriculum initiatives. As things stand at the moment there will not be another curriculum working group for history, but the changes will be QCA-led, with the QCA talking to various representative groups. It seems that the Government clearly want more young people of all abilities to be involved in and enjoying history. One way of doing this could be to organise history 5-16 in such a way that it answers important questions—for example, how and why Britain has fought wars or how human rights have developed. If the latter were taught, then it would be critical to include Magna Carta and the introduction of juries and common law in the reign of Henry II. The same could be said of many themes linked to monarchy, government, how people have lived, and so on. No chronological period would be or should be more important than any other, but would be drawn upon to track, exemplify or illustrate the development of the theme.

I thought about how to develop these ideas and translated them into four broad themes.

2. Social, technological and economic history; everyday life; industry, inventions and trade.
3. Ourselves and others; relationships with the wider world (in peace and war); diplomacy, trade, colonies, empire and commonwealth; the history of other countries from the inside.
4. Identities and inheritances, diversity and inclusion (homelands and adopted countries; histories of immigration and culture; different inheritances, their histories and their impact locally).

These could, if indeed that is what teachers wanted, be translated into 6 freestanding units at Key Stage 3. I must stress, these are only suggestions, and are intended for debate. These ideas are entirely my own and do not have any status with Government bodies. The first three may need to be taught in a different order.

**Thematic approach (especially in first three units)**

2. British history: social, technological and economic history; everyday life; industry, inventions and trade.
3. British history: ourselves and others; relationships with the wider world (in peace and war); diplomacy, trade, colonies, empire and commonwealth.
4. A local-world parallel study (to replace a world study after 1900) this could be a new concept, focusing on the histories of two localities, one in the UK (e.g. Bradford) and the other a linked locality overseas (e.g. Pakistan or Kashmir); use of ICT and web-based approaches to facilitate this; this unit is designed to address the real issue of double identities in many communities in the UK; it also examines as recommended by Raphael Samuel the past and continuing domestic effects of empire.
5. Non-British history (allow a study to the present day of a chosen European society from a menu with criteria; along the lines of QCA unit on Germany 1945-2000; this might be changed to include a wider choice, i.e. not just Europe).
6. World history after 1900 (much the same as current unit, though the parameters of such a unit could and should be discussed further).

The rationale behind unit 4 is associated with concerns arising from cultural alienation. It is possible that in 10 years time a completely different agenda may dominate. Today however we are in an age where there is fear of terrorism, especially in metropolitan areas. This follows attacks in New York in September 2001, in Madrid in March 2004, and in London in July 2005. There are tensions associated with the aftermath of war in Iraq and with the aspirations of the Palestinian people to have their own state. The July 7th attacks in London were carried out by young men, mostly of Pakistani origin who lived mainly in Leeds.

The cultural and associated identity problems faced by young people from families who originated in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir were highlighted in the Channel 4 programme Dispatches, presented by Navid Akhtar, a British-Pakistani Muslim, on Monday October 24th 2005. Sadly, often these young people feel alienated both from their adopted country and from their roots. The same might well be true of young people from West Indian or other communities in Britain. The history curriculum could give to these people greater insights into the nature of the two cultures and empower them to find or develop new and meaningful identities within Britain. However this has become such a crucial issue in Britain that it is important for all young people living within Britain to engage with the historical dimensions of these tensions. Historians and programme-makers can help. The history curriculum could thus include parallel studies of two communities, one in Britain and one in the homeland.

One problem with such an approach could be that teachers might find it difficult to narrativise all of the themes, and provide sufficient connections within the themes to satisfy the current critics. Alternatively these themes could run across units that are similar to the current Key Stage 3 menu and suggest a way of organising them, rather as the exemplars for the current units are sub-divided.

Chronological approach with all 4 themes (except the last part of 3) subsumed within them
1 British history to 1066
2 British history 1066-1500
3 British history 1500 to the present units 4, 5 and 6 as above.
One criticism could be that unit 3 is too big. This inevitably follows the addition of the earlier period. The solution would be to extend history for all pupils into Y10, with an extra British unit then (1750 to now) embracing the links between citizenship, the extension of the franchise, human rights and democracy. This would have an impact on Key Stage 2, as in effect Key Stage 2 would remain in Marsden’s terms a ‘Yo Sushi’ approach, a set of tasters, as giving overall coherence and any real depth of engagement would depend not only on a pool of teachers with more than the present degree of specialism, but also on a different kind of curriculum structure. To be fair to primary teachers of history, many of them do an excellent job, despite lack of subject expertise in the sense of that amalgam of knowledge bases that would characterise ‘expert teaching’. With the current Key Stage 2 curriculum it would be difficult to give a sense of a coherent narrative anyway as there are so many chronological breaks.

**History teaching itself as a democratic activity**

History teachers are not the tools or playthings of any political party. Peter Lee commented on the first history national curriculum that it had managed despite its association with the Conservative Government of 1979 – 1997 to avoid being party history.

A history curriculum should be a framework that allows both scholarship and effective teaching to thrive, allowing the teachers of history to exercise a judicious dosage of autonomy and interpretation within agreed but flexible parameters. History teachers should not be conscious of having to bend over backwards to deliver a particular message. Professor Daunton is right when he says that history should not be conscripted to shore up the state. The current concern over the absence of a coherent narrative that ensures a sense of continuity between the units or modules that are studied should not lead to the imposition of a state-imposed master narrative.

Lee writes of helping pupils to create their own frameworks or narratives of the past:

… we must try to understand better how to enable students to develop a more usable framework of the past in terms of which they can orientate their lives. One way of characterising this task is to say that we need a history that allows students to orientate themselves in time genetically, but to understand the past to which they orientate as constructed historically.

He quotes from Denis Shemilt who makes a very relevant point:

Perhaps then, despite the begged questions, I can be allowed to assert here that our current understanding of what can be said about the past precludes the possibility of a single accepted school narrative, not just because, contingently, we don’t happen to have one, but because to hope for such a thing as a practical achievement is to misunderstand history (the ways we can conceive of the past). If this is so, what form can we expect to find for a coherent framework of the past suitable for meaningful orientation? It must presumably be capable of organizing multiple narratives without imposing on them a fixed ‘grand narrative’.

Shemilt draws our attention to the difficulties.

Such a project has obvious dangers. By accident or design, pupils might be taught to accept a privileged ‘picture of the past’, rather than how to construct and use meaningful narratives of their own devising (Shemilt, 2000).

History teachers in schools should be allowed the same intellectual freedoms as academic historians in universities, but there should be a dialogue between the two groups. Plurality of historical interpretation can only be achieved through hard work, so there is a price to pay for such freedoms. Perhaps this plurality is the most reassuring aspect of the current proliferation of advisory groups. John Tosh, a former President of the Royal Historical Society, a body which is showing much interest in the current debate, writes:

For advances in historical knowledge arise as much from the play of debate between rival interpretations as from the efforts of the individual scholar. And the same debates which enliven the historical profession are intimately connected with the alternative visions we hold of our society in the present and the future. If history was uncontested, it would fail to provide the materials for critical debate on the social issues of the day. Plurality of historical interpretation is an essential – if underestimated – prerequisite for mature democratic politics. The past will never be placed beyond controversy, nor should it be.

**Conclusions**

Key Stage 3 history as it stands has many merits, and indeed it might be possible to incorporate Gordon Marsden’s, Sir Cyril Taylor’s and Professor Martin Daunton’s concerns entirely within the current framework. The main change I am suggesting is to enhance the sense of identity through a flexible school-designed parallel local-world study which can be adapted to local needs, thus offering an opportunity to minority ethnic groups to study those aspects of world (perhaps imperial) history that are relevant to them.

While it would seem to be inadvisable to attempt to superimpose a grand master narrative on British history,
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit 1</th>
<th>Introductory unit what’s it all about?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unit 2</td>
<td>How did medieval monarchs keep control?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 3</td>
<td>How hard was life for medieval people in town and country?</td>
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<td>Unit 4</td>
<td>How did the medieval church affect people’s lives?</td>
</tr>
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<td>Unit 5</td>
<td>Elizabeth I how successfully did she tackle the problems of her reign?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 6</td>
<td>What were the achievements of the Islamic states 600-1600?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 7</td>
<td>Images of an age what can we learn from portraits 1500-1750?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 8</td>
<td>The civil wars was England ‘turned upside down’ in the seventeenth century?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 9</td>
<td>From Glorious Revolution to the ’45 how united was the kingdom?</td>
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<td>Unit 10</td>
<td>France 1789-94 why was there a revolution?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 11</td>
<td>Industrial changes action and reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 12</td>
<td>Snapshot 1900 what was British middle-class life like?</td>
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<td>Unit 13</td>
<td>Mughal India and the coming of the British, 1526-1857 how did the Mughal Empire rise and fall?</td>
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<td>Unit 14</td>
<td>The British Empire how was it that, by 1900, Britain controlled nearly a quarter of the world?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 15</td>
<td>Black peoples of America from slavery to equality?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 16</td>
<td>The franchise why did it take so much longer for British women to get the vote?</td>
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<td>Unit 17</td>
<td>Divided Ireland why has it been so hard to achieve peace in Ireland?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 18</td>
<td>Hot war, cold war why did the major twentieth century conflicts affect so many people?</td>
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<td>Unit 19</td>
<td>How and why did the Holocaust happen?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit 20</td>
<td>Twentieth-century medicine how has it changed the lives of people?</td>
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<td>Unit 21</td>
<td>From Aristotle to the atom scientific discoveries that changed the world?</td>
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<td>Unit 22</td>
<td>The role of the individual for good or ill?</td>
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nevertheless it is worth considering the merits of identifying the history of those strands which make British society positively civic and potentially civilized, especially in terms of human rights and a democratic way of life. Other societies share many of these attributes and if this is taught it needs to be placed in a European and even wider global nexus. Pupils can construct their own frameworks, but do need a scaffolding that is not a cage. Part of the debate should be to discuss what these strands are, and how their history might be approached. Historians can certainly help in this process, and in advising teachers on approaches to longitudinal and even theme-based narratives.

Teaching the history of the British empire is an area which certainly needs further discussion. The difficulties are well summarized by Raphael Samuel. The problems identified here in the context of national history would apply equally to imperial history.

To the Left, anyway that substantial section of it which, in its teaching profession as elsewhere, has adopted ‘anti-racism’ as its special vocation, the whole discourse of nation is diseased, at once excluding to ethnic minorities and outsiders and corrupting to those within. In the British case it is fatally associated with imperialism and has been constructed, historically speaking, against the blacks. National history on this view is the record of white supremacy and any attempt to return to it would flatter both national and racial conceits. Paul Gilroy, the most eloquent writer in this vein, and an influential one, argues that, even in its radical version as ‘people’s history’, it is saturated with racial connotations and leaves neither imaginative nor conceptual space for the experience of the excluded and the oppressed.

To address this perception of a diseased discourse it would be useful if the commonwealth’s own historians in the world-wide community could provide a view that went beyond and behind racism. The Fabian Society promoted a debate on these issues in its conference on January 14th 2006, asserting the need for integration. It is widely accepted now that the history of the British empire does provide clues to understanding how Britain has become as it is today, and different ways of teaching it should be found.

Gordon Brown’s speech at this conference made a plea for a shared and more optimistic view of Britishness based on how a set of values has developed, namely liberty, responsibility and fairness. He made the point that other societies share these values, and that the British past has not been without its failures. He called for a sense of pride in the sort of society that has evolved in Britain, and stressed the importance of awareness of the historical roots of Britishness. He echoed many of the points already made in his British Council speech of July 7th 2004. He emphasised that there is much agreement between the left and the right over causes for a national loss of self-esteem and direction, and cited a number of historians whose views were significant, including Linda Colley. Squaring the circle between Paul Gilroy’s analysis of Black disaffection and the sense of the ‘host country’s’ (to use Billy Bragg’s term) disconnection with the British past (including Professor Gilroy’s perceptive view of the Black Atlantic and the concept of double consciousness) and Gordon Brown’s New Britishness, may be difficult, but worth pursuing.

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12. ibid, p.135
16. Le Monde, 4 January 2006
25. according to MacLeod, op. cit.
27. Sherratt quoted in Lee ibid.
30. see text on http://www.fabian-society.org.uk/press_office