

ACT New Zealand submission on Aotearoa New Zealand's Histories in the New Zealand Curriculum

Introduction

ACT supports the introduction of New Zealand history into the curriculum for Years 1 to 10 students in schools. It is critical that young people learn about our country's past so that they can participate in society as informed citizens. We also support schools being able to interpret New Zealand history through the experiences of local communities. However, we have significant concerns about the content of the draft curriculum released in February 2021.

ACT recommends a first principles rewrite of the Aotearoa New Zealand's Histories in the New Zealand Curriculum. Our concerns are focused on the risks of dividing history into villains and victims, the limited nature of the curriculum, and a lack of inclusiveness in the ideas that underpin it.

Recommendations

- The “three big ideas” are divisive, depressing and wrong. They should be rewritten to take account of all New Zealanders, the elements of our society that are not driven by colonisation, and the parts of our history that can be explained by forces other than power.
- The draft curriculum contains significant gaps. Other ideas – including growing civil rights and liberties, business, technology, and our citizens’ participation in two World Wars – should be included or given more prominence in the curriculum.
- The draft curriculum is a highly political document. It makes a number of questionable assumptions and claims. It should be redrafted to give a balanced and honest account of our country’s past.

Comment

The “three big ideas”

The draft curriculum requires students to understand the following “three big ideas”:

“Māori history is the foundational and continuous history of Aotearoa New Zealand.”

New Zealand is a nation of many peoples who have travelled from the furthest points of the globe, brought their histories and cultures with them and worked to give themselves, their families and this country and better future. The idea that Māori history is our “foundational and continuous history” excludes most New Zealanders. New Zealand is a nation of many peoples with long histories. Our ancestors have come here from Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. The history curriculum needs to be more inclusive of all the people who have made New Zealand home.

“Colonisation and its consequences...continue to influence all aspects of New Zealand society.”

The history curriculum should be grounded in teaching the discipline of historical analysis. The focus being proposed in this idea goes further than a historical analysis. It neglects elements of our society that are untouched by colonisation. While students need to learn about colonisation, the claim that it continues to influence all aspects of our society is depressing and wrong.

“The course of Aotearoa New Zealand’s history has been shaped by the exercise and effects of power.”

In fact, much of our history can be explained by forces other than power. For example, scientific discoveries, technological innovations, business, and artistic creativity, among many others. The claim that power has been the primary driver of our history, leaving out the likes of creativity, technology, and the growth of civil liberties, creates a narrative of oppressors and oppressed. Such a narrative is likely to overemphasise the role of the state and underemphasise the importance of individual agency. It is deeply misleading.

There are significant gaps in the draft curriculum

A history curriculum cannot cover everything about our country’s past. However, there are significant gaps in the current draft. The following should be included or given more prominence in the curriculum:

- New Zealand is a nation of many peoples with long histories who have travelled further than any others to give themselves and their families a better life
- Our story is one of growing civil rights and liberties, beginning with the Treaty of Waitangi and continuing with women’s suffrage and the Bill of Rights Act
- New Zealand’s participation in two World Wars and many other conflicts show how entwined we are in world affairs
- Science and technology, including transport, navigation and communication have shaped New Zealand by making immigration, trade and economic growth possible
- New Zealanders and their histories have embraced fashion and design in architecture, clothing, food and music
- New Zealanders have created many social technologies, from sport clubs to unions to business and the stock exchange to solve their problems and build a better life
- New Zealand has undergone significant constitutional and political developments, including the rise of political parties, parliamentary government, and human rights legislation.

The draft curriculum is highly political

The draft curriculum makes a number of questionable assumptions and claims which, cumulatively, create a highly political document.

Immigration

By the end of Year 10, students must know:

“Aotearoa New Zealand has a history of selective and discriminatory practices to control migration, with little negotiation with Māori as tangata whenua.”

This claim appears to assume that governments are required to specifically consult Māori New Zealanders on policy issues like immigration. While governments should consult with particular groups on policy changes that will directly affect them, the idea that Māori as tangata whenua should have greater rights as part of the policy-making process is incorrect.

“Cultural appropriation”

Key knowledge for Years 9 and 10 students includes:

“Māori have communicated their distinctiveness through cultural practices that have sometimes been appropriated and used inappropriately.”

Currently phrased, this statement gives the impression that so-called “cultural appropriation” is an inherently negative process. Cultural ideas and practices are constantly being adopted and exchanged. ACT’s view is that this makes for a richer and more diverse society. Without this process, our country would be a significantly poorer place.

Human rights

New Zealanders have a proud history of demanding greater liberties from government. We are frequently listed as among the freest countries in the world. The draft curriculum’s focus on workers and women is too narrow:

“When people and groups have campaigned on or asserted their human rights, it has forced the state to act. This has been evident in the actions of workers’ groups and organisations of women and of wāhine Māori. It has also been evident in law reform in relation to gender identity.”

There is far more to this story. New Zealand has abolished the death penalty, and legalised gay marriage and assisted dying. We’ve had significant debates about freedom of expression. In 1990, we passed the Bill of Rights Act which sets out the fundamental rights and freedoms enjoyed by all New Zealanders.

The welfare state

The welfare state is a polarising issue and ACT believes that students should be given a balanced view of its impacts.

It is proposed that Years 7 and 8 students be guided by the following questions:

“How did the first Labour Government’s welfare policies ease the impact and affect the lives of New Zealanders? Who benefitted? Who missed out?”

If students are to be taught that welfare policies have made people’s lives easier, it should also touch on the fact that the welfare state has created dependence on government, and that people who are in employment have better economic and social outcomes.

Conclusion

ACT submits that the draft curriculum should be redrafted to give an inclusive and honest account of New Zealand’s history. If the Government is going to use the education system to teach students our history, it needs a better curriculum.