

## ‘Howard on steroids’: History wars reignite over contested Anzac legend



*Jenni Rickard, of the Australian Parents Council, with a photo of her soldier grandfather.*

By Jordan Baker  
September 11, 2021

Jenni Rickard’s father is a Vietnam veteran, her grandfather was a soldier in World War II, and her great uncle Teddy Sheean was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. She has never fought in a war, but she has witnessed the cost.

As the president of the Australian Parents Council, she wants children to understand those costs, and supports a plan to explore conflicting views in the national history curriculum. This is why she was worried when federal Education Minister Alan Tudge said this week that the Anzac legend was “not going to be a contested idea on my watch”.

For Ms Rickard, the danger lies not in teaching students about differing views of Anzac Day, but in denying them. She believes they should learn from the past. “Educating our children, not indoctrinating our children, is at the core of a quality education,” Ms Rickard said.

Like former Prime Minister John Howard, who famously rejected a “black armband” view of the nation’s past, Mr Tudge is critical of what he describes as an overly negative

approach to history in a draft revision of the national curriculum. But Associate Professor Heather Sharp, an education academic who specialises in history, described Mr Tudge's approach as "Howard on steroids".

In radio interviews this week, Mr Tudge focused on the draft's description of events in Australian history – particularly the Anzac legend – as contested.

"Such a miserable negative view of our history ... all of us know we live in the greatest country in the world," Mr Tudge said, adding that the word "contested" appears 19 times in the draft curriculum (elsewhere, it refers to the Brisbane Line, the Treaty of Versailles, and terms such as settlement and colonisation).

"I want people to come out having learned about our country with a love of it rather than a hatred of it. Instead of Anzac Day being presented as the most sacred of all days ... it's presented as a contested idea."

Education Minister Alan Tudge does not want the history curriculum to be too negative. *CREDIT:*

Mr Tudge's Twitter account has been blocking historians and teachers who challenge his comments, spawning the hashtag #blockedbyalantudge. The teachers say they were seeking a genuine discussion, and point out that's what the term 'contested' means within the discipline of history: calling into question.

"The issues that are marked as contested or contestable in the draft are firmly grounded in legitimate scholarly debate," the History Teachers Association of NSW said in a statement.

In response to questions from the *Herald*, Mr Tudge said the changed wording around Anzac Day was "just one example of the generally negative view of our history being instilled through the draft curriculum changes. Kids should absolutely learn the facts and different views, but we need to strike a better balance between teaching the great parts of our history as much as our weaknesses."

Mr Tudge's spokesman said he assumed people were blocked because their comments were offensive.

Dr Sharp, from the University of Newcastle, said there was a mistaken view of history as a story and "a nice story, and everyone in the past agreed with each other. That's not the case," she said.

If students were to study the Anzac legend as a contested idea, they could examine the bitter debate over conscription at the time, Dr Sharp said. "Or we could look at, was going to Gallipoli a good idea, militarily speaking? Now, is it a celebration or is it a commemoration?"

"This whole idea that we should not be educating our young people about dark history and shameful past and things that are not all rosy is a bit weird," Dr Sharp said. "We would expect Germany and Japan to be teaching their kids about their not-so-savoury past, but we don't apply it to ourselves."

Some who have questioned Mr Tudge's comments have been blocked by his account *CREDIT*:

One of the historians blocked by Mr Tudge's account is Stephen Clarke, who has written to the minister. "There are now a significant number of Australian citizens attempting to engage in debate with you regarding an issue of importance to your ministerial portfolio, on a platform of your choosing, who are not able to do this," he wrote.

History teachers also worry that the culture war has overshadowed other issues with the draft curriculum. Dr Sharp is concerned about limited attention to the post-cold war period. "The Twin Towers happened 20 years ago, the fall of the Berlin Wall more than 30 years ago, but we're not teaching that," she said.

Glenn Fahey, the Research Fellow in Education Policy at the conservative-leaning Centre for Independent Studies, worries it "sucks critical oxygen" from public debate about problems with the draft in subjects with most influence on student achievement, literacy and maths.

Mr Fahey argues that politicians should stick to the curriculum-development process they themselves established – that curriculum be drafted by experts, debated by the public, and only then delivered to state and federal ministers. Public consultation on the draft curriculum has closed and revision is under way.

"Ultimately it's teachers that deliver this stuff in the classroom," he said. "The political role is really to ensure the process has been followed, the experts were heard, and the public had an opportunity to contribute."

In the past few weeks, Ms Rickard has been talking to adults about their experience of learning a version of events at school they later questioned. "It's that word contested," she said. "I would argue that's part of learning, to understand different sides of a story."

If Ms Rickard could have one wish, it would be that future leaders understood the impacts of war before they sent soldiers away. If they did, they would begin preparing the after-care of those soldiers before they left. "You can only do that if you learn the lessons of history," she said.