The fortunes of history taught in schools in the last three decades of the twentieth century may be viewed as disastrous. Taylor (2000a) has argued that the initial crisis facing history teaching in Australia was similar to that in England and Wales in the late 1960s; that it was essentially pedagogical, and that it was partly addressed by pedagogical changes in the ‘New History’ movement that emerged in the 1970s. However the problems for history in Australia went far deeper and lasted much longer than the parallel crisis in England. At lower secondary and primary levels, history was increasingly swamped by the advent of the New Social Studies movement, which was based on similar values and pedagogies to ‘New History’, but appeared to offer greater breadth of opportunities to teachers and to students. The advent of Social Studies as a core curriculum subject was consolidated by the nation-wide agreement that Society and Environment become one of the eight Key Learning Areas in the proposed National Curriculum of the early 1990s. Certainly, by the time of Taylor’s Report of the National Inquiry into School History (2000a), the fortunes of history, and Australian history in particular, in schools were apparently dire, and there appeared few crumbs of comfort in Taylor and Clark’s (2006) report. Yet, in the twenty-first century, there is evidence of a changing curriculum policy context and some evidence for a sense of optimism for history, although this optimism is tinged with concerns, even anxiety. The phenomenon that appears to be breathing life into the corpse of history is, ironically, Australian history; ironic because research into curricular developments in Western Australia in the 1980s and 1990s (Allen, 2004) revealed that many teachers believed that any emphasis on Australian history would destroy the school subject altogether. If indeed there is a change in the current policy context, what is that and how has it come about? The approach that follows is to explore the changes in the policy contexts of significance to history curricula. This approach uses the lens of contemporary policy analysis, an appropriate mechanism for understanding curriculum and one which has become increasing significant in the later twentieth and early twenty-first century (Looney, 2001).

The number of students choosing history in Years 11 and 12 at any one time may be capricious; the number of teachers qualified to teach history in any one school may be a matter of judicious appointment or pure chance; but the reality in Australia today is that the extent of history taught in schools is largely the result of decisions made by policy makers at a range of levels. These may range from senior politicians (Prime Minister or State Premier), State or Commonwealth Ministers of Education, curriculum officers in State Education Ministries or curriculum authorities, down to individual school leaders and even individual teachers. Further, the argument here is that the fortunes of school history, and Australian history as its principal component, have been the consequences of fluctuating policy contexts and policy decision-making, grounded in, though not entirely unique to, a distinct Australian context. Viewing school curricula as outcomes of policy processes is an increasingly useful way of understanding their development from historical and socio-cultural perspectives. Phillips (1998) used a model of policy analysis developed by Stephen Ball (1990, 1993, 1994) to chart the development of the history syllabus within the National Curriculum in England and Wales, and Allen (2004) used Vidovich’s (2002, 2007) modifications of Ball’s model to analyse the development of upper secondary history curricula in Western Australia (WA) from 1983 to 2000. Within their models, which identify education policy as “cyclical, unpredictable, open to interpretation, conflict, compromise and slippage” (Phillips, 1998), Ball and Vidovich have proposed three contexts of policy as the basis of the lens with which to conduct an analysis. The first is the
context of influence; briefly this relates to the foregrounding of policy, and seeks to examine, identify and explain the issues, trends and phenomena that give rise to the need for a policy statement. The second context, that of policy text production, seeks to explain policy through analysis of the policy text. The third context, that of practice, relates to the application of policy as practitioners respond in different ways to their readings and understandings of the policy texts. While referring to the context of practice, this essay focuses primarily on the changing contexts of influence, and seeks to show that these contexts with regard to history and to Society and Environment have almost turned full circle, culminating in the Commonwealth policy text Guide to the teaching of Australian History in Years 9 and 10 (November 2007). While that policy may be lost in the upshot of Howard’s defeat in the general election held several weeks later, its publication represents a significant change in the policy context with regard to the teaching and learning of history in schools, and especially that of Australian history.

As far back as the early 1950s, Collins (1952) conducted a broad survey of history teachers in Western Australia and discovered, though not in his words, a subject in deep crisis. Morale among teachers was low, largely due to having to teach a prescriptive examination syllabus which could not realistically be covered in the timeframe allotted. The topics mandated, and the resultant pedagogies, in lower secondary classes were inappropriate and unedifying, and there was widespread ambivalence about the teaching of Australian history. The upshot, as Collins reported, was a serious decline in the number of students electing to study history in both the compulsory and post-compulsory years of schooling. By the late 1960s, however, as Taylor (2000a) has outlined, the crisis was more widely recognised. The crisis within school history was further complicated by a number of almost contemporaneous developments. These included: reports and regulations across several states to remove lower secondary examination syllabuses (e.g. the Dettman Report in WA, 1969); a parallel decline in the influence of universities in determining secondary school curricula, and by inference, primary curricula too, which had been traditionally discipline-based; the advent of school-based curriculum decision making (SBCDM); overall direction within SBCDM coming from a curriculum director who was avowedly critical of history as a school based discipline (Taylor, 2000a); and all these occurred in a context that increasingly embraced the New Social Studies movement (Barcan, 1993). There was also a number of social, economic and political influences that mitigated against the fortunes of history and the rise of Social Studies which can be found in the debate between Alan Barcan and Stuart Macintyre in the Australian Journal of Education in 1997. Articles and correspondence in Historica, the journal of the History Association of WA — later the History Teachers’ Association (HTAWA) — in the 1970s and early 1980s reveal further evidence of the ongoing crisis, and in one particularly telling letter, Bennett (1980) raised the spectre, perhaps even the reality, of impending redundancies for history teachers.

The features of the context of influence at this time for history curriculum policy makers revolved around issues of economic change, and in school curricula, a focus on utilitarianism and issues of ‘relevance’. It became increasingly difficult to identify the value of history for employability in the current and future economic environment and, therefore, to justify its inclusion in compulsory syllabuses at least. Its content was interesting but remote; its disciplinary skills idiosyncratic and not transferable, except in a very few professions. In this context in almost all states, from the early 1970s, Social Studies replaced discrete history and geography courses in lower secondary school curricula; its claims for contemporary relevance were both noted and decried by Barcan (1972; 1993). The place of history within each K–10 curriculum varied. A state such as WA retained a reasonably uniform K–10 curriculum, with broadly mandated support to the teaching of those topics. In other states, however, often within a context of SBCDM, history was less well protected. As Barcan prophesied (1972) and subsequently argued (1993; 1997), history as a meaningful discipline and a form of knowledge became increasingly difficult to identify.

The nation-wide agreement, after 1989, that (Studies of) Society and Environment become one of the eight Key Learning Areas (KLA) of school K–10 curricula appeared to hasten history’s demise. In the new Curriculum Frameworks, history was now conflated as being merely a strand ‘Time, Continuity and Change’ (TCC). The outcomes within that strand make reference to some historical
concepts, such as events, causation, continuity and change (e.g. WA Outcomes and Standards Framework: Student Outcome Statements, 1998) but make no requirement of any unique disciplinary approaches, modes of inquiry or skills. General social science inquiry methods appeared in the common skills strand 'Investigation Communication and Participation' but few of these directed genuine historical study. Only in New South Wales, with the mandated 200 hours of history (and geography) in Years 7–10 after 1993, gave hope for retaining a disciplinary approach, yet even here there was evidence of disaffection. History teachers were unhappy with many aspects of the new syllabus such as its construction, the mandated content — its scope and its nature — and its assessment.

One outcome of this loss of historical identity was to contribute to the decline in upper school enrolments (Barcan, 1997; Taylor, 2000a). While no state removed history as a subject in the post-compulsory fields of electives in Years 11 and 12, Teese and Polesel (2003) chart the decline of history as a subject of choice among Victorian senior school students from 1975 to 1998. In 1975 approximately 33% of boys and 59% of girls studied at least one history paper in the Higher School Certificate. By 1998, participation in senior history classes amounted to 9% of boys and 13% of girls. Between 1993 and 1998 other states showed similar decline in the percentage of Year 12 students studying history: Tasmania 20% to 13%; South Australia 37% to 21%; Northern Territory 35% to 29% (Taylor, 2000a). In NSW at the same time, numbers fell from 36% to 31%, and these were partly attributed to the mandated history syllabus because the compulsory subject had turned students off history: “Compulsory 9 and 10 means the kids won’t choose Year 11 history” (Taylor, 2000a, p. 91).

Within the context of practice, however, all was not lost. Some teachers and departments responded to the Frameworks by realising that they could meet the outcome requirements of each strand and still teach distinct disciplines. History could cover strands of 'Time, Continuity and Change' and 'Culture', while geography covered 'Place and Space' and aspects of 'Natural and Social Systems' and 'Resources'. It could be argued that this was more prevalent in private schools, particularly those with a strong academic tradition and a focus on Year 12 results, as the ongoing exposure to the disciplines would likely lead to improved results in the later years of schooling. Another compromise was to return to subject based courses in Year 10 after integrated courses in Years 8 and 9, for the purposes of 'informed' student subject selection during that year. Nevertheless, these were small breakthroughs in an otherwise bleak landscape; history, in the lower secondary years and in primary years, seemed to be in terminal decline.

Irrespective of the merits or otherwise of Social Studies/Society and Environment, how had the policy context, as far as history was concerned, produced such a repudiation of the subject? One answer may be that the subject failed in two important aspects of the policy landscape. Bell and Stevenson (2006) argue that there are two principal themes or perspectives underpinning education policy. One is the theme of human capital, with an emphasis on utilitarian curricula; the other is the theme of citizenship and social justice. The descriptive analysis so far clearly suggests that history had failed for those who supported the first perspective; the subject had no value or relevance for changing economic circumstances, as it was identified as increasingly remote, out-of-touc with modern-day realities and even an ill-defined discipline, which only appealed to a professional group based in university academe (Jenkins, 1989). More importantly and unexpectedly, however, history also failed to convince those who approached curriculum from a citizenship perspective. As Standish (2007) has passionately argued, the nature of citizenship education in a context of increased political control of curricula has changed from education for citizenship based on disciplinary knowledge and skills to education of citizens, by inculcating politically determined, ethical, global citizenship values in young people, to develop a pre-determined model of a citizen. Immersing young people in the skills of historical investigation and critical analysis, based on unique human activities within a narrative or thematic framework was no longer regarded as productive, and history had no more value in this regard than any other social science subject. Disciplines and forms of knowledge (Hirst, 1974a, 1974b; Phenix, 1964) also lost appeal, although Gardner (2000), inspired by Jerome Bruner, has now emerged as a champion of both disciplinary study and of history.

The failure of history in this regard was further compounded, initially, by the 'History wars' and cultural conflict of the 1980s and 1990s (Macintyre
& Clark, 2003), particularly with regard to Australian history. The principal events of the 'History wars' in the classroom, as described by Ann Clark (2003), centred on interpretive issues, such as the views on the arrival of British after 1788 as settlement or invasion, and the analysis of topics related to Indigenous-European relations, multiculturalism and feminism. These issues became particularly focused during the Bicentenary celebrations of 1988 and later in newspaper investigations into history textbooks and departmental syllabus statements (Clark, 2003, pp. 177-182). Rejecting the 'black armband view' of Australian history, commentators mounted a 'discourse of derision' over the new, critical approaches to history teaching, as indicative of the evils of the 'New History' per se and the progressive methodologies which 'New History' seemed to encapsulate.

The initial outcome was that, for many, history had revealed itself as even less appropriate to meet the requirements for citizenship education which conservatives had long believed it was ideally suited. History was falling on two fronts. It had been rejected as a vehicle for citizenship education by those who supported the New Social Studies movement, for being too narrow in content, discipline and perspectives. Others now rejected it because it was simply too dangerous — young people taking critical perspectives of the nation's past was not what was required. During the Keating government (1991–1996), citizenship education was more aligned with the study of civics, and political education. Some saw an opportunity here to resuscitate the subject as Australian history might be best positioned to serve these ends (Macintyre, 1996; Young, 1996 and Mellor, 1996), but the results have been largely disappointing for history teachers.

Ironically, however, it may be that the controversies of the 'History wars' in the classroom served to revisit the importance of history as a vehicle for citizenship education. The extent of the controversy over what was being taught in school history or in the TCC components of SOSE may well have alerted certain stakeholders to the potential of the subject for those aspects of citizenship education that promoted national identity and increased awareness of traditional institutions. The controversies had revealed considerable media interest in what type of history was being taught in schools, and the reactions of politicians, in the light of successive conservative federal governments after 1996, suggested that there was sufficient popular concern to drive them towards rebuking or castigating some of the critical perspectives that were emerging in the modern textbooks.

One institution that appeared to identify an opportunity with regard to history and citizenship education was the Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA). It is not clear if it was capitalising on the paucity of history in lower secondary schools, or attempting to fill a void, but, since 2000, the DVA has contributed considerable resources to schools in the area of Australian military history (Lake, 2007). At a time of tight or declining budgets, the arrival of free packages in every school, such as the three-video pack Australians at War (2001), or Operation Clock: Anzac to Kokoda (2005), an interactive CD Rom was manna for many resources-strapped departments, and ideas-strapped teachers. The latter had the advantage of not requiring specialist history teachers to supervise its operation. The funding of the John Simpson (Kirkpatrick) History Prize went some way to ensure at least one historical topic in this regard was being studied in some depth in SOSE curricula by some students. However, as Lake (2007) rightly points out, the histories peddled by the DVA history are limited and do not attempt to provide a holistic, critical view of the times when Australia was at war, as opposed to simply Australians at war. What is left out is as significant as what is included. Nevertheless, a well-funded DVA has identified an area where teachers needed considerable help and developed an historical package to meet the needs of both parties. At the same time, the resources of the DVA and the Australian War Memorial (AWM) have also served to highlight the paucity of historical resources in other areas of Australian history. Fewer and poorer resources can be found for studies of Indigenous history, Federation or the Great Depression, for example, and teachers despairingly compare these with overseas history resources such as those at 'Schoolhistory.co.uk', the 'Learning Curve', 'Spartacus' and the BBC.

This growing emphasis on school history to develop national identity in Western nations has been outlined and analysed in great detail by Phillips (1998). Beginning with the question 'why do governments fear history?', Phillips describes and analyses the development of the history syllabus in the National Curriculum for England
and Wales, and how politicians intervened dramatically in the construction of the syllabus, often to the exclusion of input from leading historians. What politicians were after, he argued was ‘the big prize’, the way that we are taught history and the potential impact on succeeding generations (Kettle, 1990, in Phillips, 1998). There is evidence of parallels between the English experience that Phillips describes and developments in Australia. Howard’s Prime Ministership since 1996 has witnessed a development from his own personal articulations about the nature of history teaching to the setting up of the National Inquiry into School History (2000), the ‘History Summit’ of 2006, and the development of a set of guidelines for a national history curriculum (2007). In his ‘root and branch’ speech in January 2006, Howard articulated passionately his conception of the nature and purpose of teaching Australian history: a chronological, narrative approach; the “central currents of our nation’s development; prescribed subject matter, such as ‘indigenous history... the great and enduring heritage of Western civilisation... the evolution of parliamentary democracy’. A failure to know our own history means that “young people are at risk of being disinherited from our community” (Howard, 2006).

Despite widespread criticism of this speech and most of his interventions into debates on history, Howard has both contributed to, and reflected, the altering policy context with regard to school history and Australian history. There will always be disagreement on what and how history should be taught, learnt and assessed, and these differences were recognised by Matters and Masters (2007) in their report on Year 12 curriculum content and achievement standards. They note agreement across the six states and two territories with regard to “the purposes of studying history... the skills of historical inquiry and on the approach to the study of history” (p. vi). More noticeable, however, are the differences: on the amount of Australian history in courses; the inclusion of “Aboriginal studies”; the organisation of subject matter; and the identification of specific topics. The fact that Australian history was one of the few subjects reviewed in this study gives a strong indication of the changing context of influence. Another is that the Australian Labor Party, which has now assumed federal government, has not resiled on the introduction of Australian history as part of a national curriculum to which they stated commitment in the election campaign. Therefore it would seem, as Phillips (1998) argues, that politicians on both sides of the political landscape agree on the significance of ‘the big prize’, a national approach to the teaching of history, and that school history should be Australian history.

While school history still may fail to serve a utilitarian function within curriculum policy, there is evidence that it has at least succeeded in recapturing ground from the citizenship perspective and that, as a result, there is the potential for the subject to gain greater favour with the policy makers who increasingly determine the constitution of school curricula these days. This positive trend has been contemporaneous with a broad, sustained, populist attack on outcomes-based education, which has in large part been targeted at the Society and Environment KLA. The attacks have been trumpeted by Kevin Donnelly, who through a privileged voice in News Limited newspapers, has denigrated outcomes-based integrated subjects and championed a return to disciplines, but as he and other like-minded identify them. The call by Australian primary schools principals for a return to more disciplinary approaches in their curricula, and specific mention of history as one of these (2007) reflects another positive step. Arguably, all three trends may reflect the increasingly significant part that parental influences have on curriculum construction, through more complex curriculum policy networks.

If the links between history and citizenship education have been rejuvenated, it is likely that the future of history in the short term lies with those policy makers and networks at the Commonwealth level. At this level, at least, there seems to be increasing consensus about the value that Australian history, taught in schools, can have in developing Australian citizens. As Taylor (2000b, p. 861) has remarked so precisely, “After all, this is a subject that is typically more influenced by politics than by any pedagogical wisdom”. Whether history is a phoenix and is able to recover some of its former status, or challenge the hegemony of integrated Society and Environment approaches in early and middle schooling phases, remains to be seen. For some, at least, there is evidence of new growth.
References


