

GENERAL MATTERS

5.21 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I wish to discuss history teaching in schools, because the study of history in schools has reached an all-time low. Last year, for the first time, the proportion of pupils being entered for history GCSE dropped beneath 30%, but the situation is actually far worse than that.

Yesterday, I released a report, “History in Schools: A School Report”, which reveals that in vast areas of the country—**often in the most deprived areas of our nation—history is being forgotten entirely.** In 77 local authorities fewer than one in five pupils is passing history GCSE, but we need to break the figures down and examine individual local authorities, because in places such as Knowsley under 8% of pupils are passing history GCSE. Only four pupils in the whole of that local authority area passed A-level history. In 2010, 159 schools in this country did not enter a single pupil for history GCSE. We must address the situation urgently.

Often it is the *Daily Mail* or academics who discuss what type of history should be studied in schools, whose history should be studied, how history should be studied in the curriculum, whether we should have a narrative form of history or a more interpretive form of history that looks at sources, and whether history should be seen as a framework of facts. The Government are instituting a curriculum review, and we welcome that. **I hope that it will examine the process whereby history is studied in bite-sized chunks and pupils do not get a sense of a narrative framework of history**—they dot around from ancient Egypt to the Victorians, then on to the Tudors and off to 20th century history. Although we can debate whose history and what type of history should be studied, we should not deny that history is a crucial subject that binds us as one nation. However, it is becoming a subject of two nations, and that is the issue that I wish to raise with the House.

Britain is dangerously isolated in Europe—and not for a good reason— because we are the only nation apart from Albania that does not make the study of history compulsory beyond 14. I do not believe that we should be in that club, so I put my case to the Government that although the curriculum review is ongoing and will carry on until 2014, There has never been a more compelling time to make history a compulsory subject to study to 16. If I was to tell the Minister what my ideal Christmas present would be, as the vice-chair of the all-party group on archives and history I would say that it would be to make the study of history compulsory to 16 for all pupils. I wish everyone a happy Christmas.

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10 January 2012

History Teaching

11 am

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I thank the Speaker for selecting this subject for debate and am grateful to have a second opportunity to talk about history in schools. When I raised the topic during the Christmas Adjournment debate, I said that if I were to choose one Christmas present, it would be to make history compulsory to the age of 16 in schools. I might have been a bit too hasty in making that wish, however, because the national curriculum review is set to continue for another two years.

Today is a good opportunity for Members to discuss the teaching of history in schools and whether it should be compulsory to the age of 16, as it is in most other countries in Europe. As I said in the Adjournment debate, it is a mark of shame that we, along with Albania, are the only European country that does not teach history in some form beyond the age of 14.

In the Adjournment debate, I mentioned a report that I have written, "History in Schools: A School Report". I am happy to give a copy to any Member who is interested in reading it; the Minister already has one to hand. Essentially, my report highlights the state of history in schools today, and it does not seek to make party political points. In 1997, a paltry 36% of pupils studied history GCSE. Last year, the number dropped below 30% to 29.5%. Those figures, however, hide what is happening with history across the country. Instead of uniting us as one nation and allowing us to have a coherent national identity, the subject has divided us into two nations of haves and have-nots.

In my report, I break down all the figures by local authority and show the number of pupils taking and passing history at GCSE. In 77 local authorities, fewer than one in five pupils is passing history GCSE. However, the situation is even worse than that. In local authorities such as Knowsley, fewer than 8% of pupils are passing history GCSE.

Sir Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): The hon. Gentleman has given us the headlines. Does he share my concern that at local history level, the figures are even worse? Pupils do not know what has gone on historically in their own local areas.

Chris Skidmore: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I will come on to that topic later. First, as a good historian, I want to set out a narrative of what has gone on in the country so far and then to debate what we should do about it. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that local history should feature more prominently in the curriculum, but more on that anon.

In 77 local authorities, fewer than one in five pupils is passing history GCSE. In one local authority, Knowsley, the figure has gone down to 8%, with just four pupils out of 2,000 passing history A-level.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Let me understand what the hon. Gentleman is proposing. **Does he think that the teaching of history post-14 should be compulsory in academies?**

10 Jan 2012 : Column 26WH

Chris Skidmore: I was going to get on to another figure. **In 159 schools, not a single pupil is being entered for history GCSE, which includes academies and comprehensives—it is roughly balanced between the two.** We must have an honest debate about the curriculum. The national curriculum in the 1990s intended to make history compulsory to 16, and we should be looking to do that in academies, comprehensives and all other schools.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Is it my hon. Friend's intention to make sure that every student studies history until GCSE level? If students are taking GCSEs, which presumably most of them are, they will therefore take history at GCSE, which is something that I totally support.

Chris Skidmore: **I want history to be compulsory in some form to 16. I will come on to the important issue of the qualification later. Just as maths, English and science are compulsory in all schools, so too should history.** Education is about not simply providing skills, knowledge and requirements for jobs, professions and universities—or whatever route or career a pupil may decide to take—but creating a canon of knowledge. I want every pupil to leave school not only with the basics but with an understanding of the basic principles of our constitution and history. They should have a rounded education and history plays a vital role in that.

Kevin Brennan: By what mechanism would the hon. Gentleman like to make history compulsory in academies, given that academies are exempt from the national curriculum?

Chris Skidmore: I am startled by the hon. Gentleman's response. He was a Minister once.

Kevin Brennan: And a teacher.

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman knows very well that although academies are exempt from other subjects in the national curriculum, pupils still have to study maths, English and science. Those subjects are compulsory, and academies are bound by law in academy frameworks and agreements to provide them. Under my proposals, history would be included in the same way.

Kevin Brennan: In the agreement?

Chris Skidmore: Yes. Let me take a few more interventions.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate. I studied history at A-level. Let me suggest where we should go from here. Certain schools, such as Chatham grammar school where I am currently a governor, have now brought in the E-bac system in which the humanities, history or geography, have to be taken by students up to the age of 16 for GCSE. That is the way forward. Under this Government, people are being pushed to take history and there is a recognition of its importance in our curriculum and in our understanding of our country.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 27WH

Chris Skidmore: The E-bac is a welcome development, but we must go further. When looking at grammar schools and selective schools, it is interesting to look beneath the statistics. In comprehensive schools in 1997, 169,298 pupils took history GCSE. That figure has now dropped to 155,982. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) is chuntering. Would she like to say something?

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman tell us why there has been this decline in the study of history? What is his analysis of why this has come about? Is it to do with the interest of the pupils?

Chris Skidmore: The decline has been a slow one. I do not wish to make party political points during this debate. David Cannadine's excellent new book, "The Right Kind of History", shows that these debates have been going round in circles since the early part of the 20th century and that lamenting the decline of history is nothing new. What is new is that we are competing in an international market against other countries, the pupils of which are being rigorously taught and assessed in all subjects and are driving forward in a way that our pupils are not.

There are some schools in which pupils take history to 16. My hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) has mentioned a grammar school in his constituency. It is of interest to me that while the numbers taking history GCSE have been declining in comprehensive schools, they have been increasing in grammar schools since 1997. Although we have 29.5% of pupils in comprehensive schools taking history GCSE, we have 55% of pupils in grammar schools taking history and 48% in independent schools. The gap between grammar schools and comprehensive schools in terms of the proportion of pupils who are taking history GCSE has increased from 17.4% in 1997 to 24.9% in 2010, which is a real problem. The growing divide in education is no longer just about standards in different parts of the country but about the subjects that we choose to take at school. I worry how that will affect our national identity.

Eric Ollerenshaw (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate and pursuing the topic. Does he agree that part of the decline began in the 1970s? Let me declare an interest here; I was a teacher in the 1970s. History teachers were almost compelled to change the nature of what they were teaching to encompass what is known today as the schools history project. Instead of teaching the narrative, teachers were forced to try to teach 11, 12 and 13-year-olds to become historians. What happened then was a loss of confidence and interest in what history teachers were trying to do.

Chris Skidmore: When we look at the nature of the curriculum itself, we see that there have been historical problems. My hon. Friend was a secondary school history teacher before he entered this House and therefore has a wealth of experience—probably more than me—of what actually happens in schools with teaching history. He also knows that, although we may talk about the curriculum and assessment and examination structures, if we are going to make history compulsory to 16, for

10 Jan 2012 : Column 28WH

pupils themselves history will only be as good as the teachers who teach it, which is obviously a crucial issue. We all remember our great teachers when we were at school. I had great history teachers, which was one reason why I ended up on the road to becoming a historian before I entered this place.

The Ofsted report, "History for all", showed that history teaching was "good" or "outstanding" in 63 out of the 83 primary schools that Ofsted assessed, and "good" or "outstanding" in 59 out of 83 secondary schools that it assessed. Nevertheless, the report expressed genuine concerns about the quality of the subject training for teachers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this issue to Westminster Hall today. As he has said, history is not just about dates and events, because it is about more than those things. It is also about learning the lessons of lives that were well lived and the lessons of lives that were poorly lived, and perhaps about telling the difference between the two. Does he agree that education in history is much more important than just teaching the facts, figures and dates of history?

Chris Skidmore: One of the reasons why I wanted to secure this debate was to try to get some form of agreement and to have a discussion about more than the nature of history. We can talk about "what" history or "whose" history—whether it is local or national history—and we need to talk about history in terms of the curriculum and examinations, but let us start from a baseline that we can never deny, namely "why" history. Historians have probably come at things from the wrong end, in that they are, as Isaiah Berlin would have put it, foxes rather than hedgehogs. We often focus on the minutiae, and so we start focusing on what should be in the curriculum and how we should frame it without coming to an agreement that we should have history to 16, as most other countries in the world do. That is where I want to get to, and then let us fill out things and colour in the blanks.

Rehman Chishti: I want to follow the question put by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). With regard to teaching history, it is linked to the use of essays, in promoting critical thinking, vocabulary and one's communication skills. Nowadays, however, modern assessments are much shorter and therefore essays are not used, so the communication skills and increased vocabulary that a student would otherwise have got from writing history essays are not there.

Chris Skidmore: That is a very good point. When we look at the curriculum and the historical content that is being taught, at the moment history teaching obviously finishes for most people at 14. The problem with that approach is that trying to fit into the syllabus the broad span of British history becomes almost impossible and in fact we get a situation where, instead of having a narrative and chronological approach, there is a sort of "Dr Who" time travel fantasy of going from the Tudors back to ancient Egypt, forward to the Romans and then to the Victorians. As a Tudor historian myself, I know that the wars of the roses are rarely taught in schools. Equally, I see that we have a civil war historian in our midst today, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central

10 Jan 2012 : Column 29WH

(Tristram Hunt), and he will probably agree that the protectorate is rarely taught in schools and neither is the Glorious Revolution. Unless students have some broad form of a chronology, it is impossible for teachers to get across a genuine interest in history. **If history**

is taught in bite-sized chunks, we are not only doing history a disservice but history students, because they cannot understand the very framework of history itself.

We need to look at that issue, and I believe that making history compulsory to 16 would aid that process of creating a chronology, because for the first time we would then be able to integrate key stage 3 and key stage 4. When we were at school, we actually learned more British history in key stage 3 and even in key stage 2 than we did later on. At the moment, I am writing a book about the battle of Bosworth, an event that is a compulsory part of the curriculum in key stage 2; students have to learn the dates, the framework and what happened then. However, the battle of Bosworth is not part of key stage 3; instead, in key stage 3 students go back again to the mediaeval period. I think that key stage 3 covers the iron age to mediaeval times, with no reference to the Anglo-Saxons or to the Vikings. We need to look at that issue. We should leave the detail up to the national curriculum review within the framework of history being compulsory up to the age of 16.

Helen Goodman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me for a second time. I am interested in the examples that he has given, because the interesting thing about Britain and our modern identity is surely the fact that, for the past four centuries, our history has been an imperial one and that is one of the most important things about Britain. I am not denying that 1066 matters, but the hon. Gentleman did not mention that whole imperial period, and he needs to foreground it.

Chris Skidmore: Yes—absolutely. I now want to talk about the GCSE itself with that point in mind, because we currently have a situation where students stop studying history as a compulsory subject at the end of key stage 3, and then some pupils start their history GCSE as an option. However, the GCSE itself does not necessarily focus on British history; often it focuses on the Third Reich and Stalin's Russia. There is also the schools history project, which is the history of medicine, but that is a very narrow subject to be assessed on.

Although we can debate what should be in the curriculum, we cannot get away from the fact that in our age examination and assessment drive learning in schools. In addition to history being made compulsory to 16, what we need is a narrative British history GCSE that teaches the whole span of British history, and our imperial history to boot, right up to whatever we would like to call the cut-off period of history. Such a GCSE would give pupils the option to study in depth every period of British history and to be assessed on their knowledge of those periods. Again, I do not want to say what the exact nature of the exam for such a GCSE would be, and a lot of work would need to go into preparing it. However, the GCSE in its current form does not allow narrative British history to be taught. So, in addition to making history compulsory to 16, we also need qualification reform.

I will conclude now, as I am sure that other Members want to speak in this debate; I am delighted to see so many Members in Westminster Hall today—happy new

10 Jan 2012 : Column 30WH

year! This is the first debate for me in this new parliamentary term. We should come to a common conclusion and common ground, so that we can discuss what should be in the history curriculum and what type of examination we should have. We cannot deny that there is a serious problem in our nation. As I said earlier, **a subject that should unite us as one nation is becoming a subject for two nations—the haves and have-nots, or whatever one**

wants to call them. In certain areas of the country, history is becoming a dead subject in schools. I want that situation to end, and I therefore propose that history should be compulsory in schools until the age of 16.

11.17 am

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Chope, for allowing me to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) on securing this valuable debate, which has really put into practice his excellent skills of research, data analysis, econometrics and geography. All those skills have been brought together today, showing that he is a superb historian.

It seems to me that what we are discussing today is not really geography; we are discussing the two-nation divide in terms not of the north and south, but of a class divide, based on the traditional Disraelian notion of two nations.

I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that history has a particular locus and place within schools. In many ways, I was opposed to the push under the last Government for citizenship teaching, because it seemed to me that, first, citizenship teaching took a chunk out of the syllabus and more often than not history teachers were forced to teach citizenship and that, secondly, we should teach citizenship through history. A study of the past is the best mechanism for understanding one's role in the present. Obviously, one can divert into the constitution, the judiciary and all the rest in terms of the modern world, but in terms of understanding both our place as citizens and the role of Britain, it seems to me that history is the best place to do that. At one point, we actually had a review that said we should teach history as part of citizenship, which seemed to me to get things slightly the wrong way round.

As we have heard, history is also a very effective academic subject. The Education Secretary likes to draw on the case of Mark Zuckerberg studying ancient Hebrew and then founding Facebook, but one can also point to many innovative entrepreneurs, successful public servants and business people who studied history and benefited from the rigours that studying history brings.

It seems to me that the subject is not necessarily in crisis. The hon. Member for Kingswood mentioned David Cannadine's new book, which points to this perpetual debate about the nature of history and, without being too partisan on the first day back after the break, I suggest that this is a crisis within the Conservative party. The party likes to talk about the teaching of Britishness and of British history and our understanding of it, partly because of its own various problems with the nature of modern Britain, and it retreats into a debate about the teaching of British history often, it seems, as a vehicle for other more contemporary debates. Of course, historically, the role of history is to retreat into the past to analyse the present.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 31WH

Figures for the take-up of history at GCSE level hover around 30% to 35%. The percentage has gone up and down over the years, and I think it stands at around 33% at the moment.

Chris Skidmore: I will send the hon. Gentleman a copy of my report, so that he has the accurate figures. I came to this debate not wanting to make party political points, but the percentage has not hovered; it has gone down consistently every year in comprehensive schools since 1997, and it has just gone below 30%, which was partly the trigger for my calling this debate and writing the report.

Tristram Hunt: I am grateful for that intervention. I was referring to the national figures, and let me now come on to the specificities of the hon. Gentleman's debate.

There seems to be a class divide—a worrying schism in what our children are taught. As the hon. Gentleman suggested, it is more than the loss of an academic subject; it is the loss of a patrimony and of a broader understanding of citizenship and identity. By not teaching history in many of our disadvantaged communities, we could be losing some brilliant future historians. We are very good at history in this country. Indeed, we are often accused of being too obsessed with the past, but we produce a good number of scholars, often from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, we have faced an unacceptable shunting of children from disadvantaged communities away from academic subjects and, more often than not, on to semi-vocational ones. That has boosted grades for schools but has sold these kids, who have wanted to go on to sixth form and university, a pup. There has been an ethos that in certain communities such subjects are too difficult, and that has presaged league table results.

We can all relate anecdotes of young people being pushed away from subjects that they should be encouraged to take up. We need a rethink. We are all in favour of proper training in vocational subjects, but it should come after a detailed and solid academic training. That is the German model, and the Alison Wolf report importantly suggested that we should get the grounding right and then allow young people to make the decision about which way to go, with either businesses taking on the training or it being continued in schools.

We should not shunt children from disadvantaged communities off academic subjects; nor should we allow schools to merge history and geography into a humanities subject in which pupils appreciate no element of the discipline. That is particularly a problem in certain academies, and Ministers are slightly shifty on the subject, not least because it is very difficult to get data out of the academies about what is being taught. I have tabled endless questions, which have been answered in different ways, but it seems that in the push for league table results certain academies are disfranchising children.

This also raises an interesting point about the ambition of the Secretary of State for Education for a national story of Britain and Britishness. If the Government's policy is for ever greater pluralism in educational provision, with free schools and academies, where will we get the

10 Jan 2012 : Column 32WH

national cohesive story from if every school tells a different story about history and if every school is encouraged to talk to its own student make-up? The Government have an interesting tension between a traditional conservative belief in a national narrative and their open-market approach to schools and what they teach.

The problem is not the syllabus. Key stage 3 teaches empire, industrialisation and a narrative story of British history. It is pretty a good syllabus if it is done well and, crucially, if it is given the time, but the average 13-year-old in a British school gets only one hour a week to study history, and with such timetabling—only 33 or 34 hours a year—it might not be possible to develop the skills, understanding and narrative. There are cries about there being no Nelson, Wellington or Churchill in the syllabus. That is not true, but there needs to be the space and context within which those characters and their history can be taught.

History teachers do not regard the syllabus as the problem, and the old divide between skills and narrative is not so much the problem anymore either, because the best history teachers combine them—one of the advantages of modern information technology and teaching mechanisms. It is exciting if teachers can get kids to use the internet to look at mediaeval roles, the Magna Carta or the Bill of Rights, and that also teaches a narrative history.

Chris Skidmore: Ofsted's "History for all" report found that the quality of subject training for teachers was inadequate in one in three schools and that teachers in those schools did not fully appreciate progression in historical thinking.

Tristram Hunt: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. We all know that inspired and inspiring teachers are key. With numeracy and literacy over the past 10 years, it seems that in certain circumstances teachers got bored and that children could sense it. If teachers are not inspired and children are not inspired by them, we do not get the learning, and we need much more focus on ensuring that teachers are inspired and that they are up to date with the latest scholarship and understand progression.

In Stoke-on-Trent, I would like to get Keele and Staffordshire universities together with the local teachers to ensure that the latter are up to date with the scholarship and are still inspired by it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) said, if a teacher is inspiring—as he was in his classroom—the children come alive, and are passionate and interested in the subject.

I will end here because I know that many other Members want to speak, and I apologise for doing so, because I have to meet a constituent later this morning. I am still in two minds about the push towards compulsory history to 16. I have an open mind about it. We risk damaging interest in pursuing the subject if we make it compulsory for huge swathes of children who are simply not interested. That will affect learning in the classroom.

I appreciate the broader issue about history's role in citizenship. I also understand the point about learning and over-learning certain elements of our national past, such as the Third Reich and dictators. That has much to do with the commerce of education. Once we have

10 Jan 2012 : Column 33WH

history textbooks and the machinery of learning, it is difficult to get out of the rut of learning and teaching the same things over and again. It is challenging to get undergraduates who are almost trauma victims, having studied the Third Reich three times, to appreciate broader European or British history.

Jim Shannon: When I was at school, I had the opportunity to learn Irish history, which is probably most unusual for a person from a Unionist tradition. It did not make me any less of

a Unionist; indeed, it cemented my Unionism and made me stronger in my beliefs. That is an example. I learned something else, but remained a Unionist.

Tristram Hunt: Those of us who are privileged to have read W. E. H. Lecky's "A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century" will know that, although we might think that studying the history of Ireland will push us one way, it can take us in a very different direction.

I conclude by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Kingswood for his research and for bringing the matter to national prominence. Class and social division are an issue. We must ensure that schools in disadvantaged communities and areas allow their pupils the opportunity to study history in all its wonderful manifestations.

11.32 am

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) on his well-chosen topic to start off the year. I am slightly in awe of the two fantastic historians in the room. It makes me rather nervous to offer any contribution, but in for a penny, in for a pound is the only attitude to take.

People with an interest in history cannot help realising that discussions about why we study it and what we should study inspire more vitriol among the historian community and more ink on the pages of our opinion magazines and newspapers than almost any other subject. My hon. Friend has set his topic commendably wide, but rather than rehearsing the undergraduate essays on "Why study history?" that I wrote for my Oxbridge preparations, I will focus on why and how we should study it.

We all have a personal view on what history is, why we study it and why we learn it. After 10 years of studying it, just as I was about to leave university, it finally taught me how to think properly—a useful lesson that I like to think that I have carried with me into this place, although opponents may disagree. History is also a study of the consequences of human nature. As a subject, it is not unique in teaching us how to think properly, form an argument and judge and assess evidence—other topics can do that, too—but it brings an additional benefit: it comes with a body of knowledge that allows us to understand why we are where we are, which is fundamental.

I realise that there are some, perhaps wishing to make mischief, who define the Conservative party as a bunch of conservatives with a small c obsessed by our narrative history and constantly seeking that golden thread. That does not interest me. I would far rather focus on what history should not consist of. I have no desire to see children sitting in a classroom chanting their regnal

10 Jan 2012 : Column 34WH

dates as though they were times tables. It is like having a wardrobe full of coat hangers with no clothes hanging on them. I am not sure that I could recite the kings and queens of England with any great accuracy.

Sir Lewis Namier identified elections as the locks on the great canal of British history. He was right, but there is no point in being able to recite every significant general election if we cannot talk about the water that flowed through those locks and the changes that came with

them. I would love to see Sir Lewis Namier applying his comparative biography techniques to the current Government and Opposition Front Benchers. He might show some interesting comparisons with what we occasionally read in the press.

Nor should history be only about entertainment—horrible histories, blood and gore, and who killed whom in the Tower of London. That is entertaining, but what does it teach us? I am not sure that it teaches us much, other than how to have fun. History is not about teleology, a national story or just a narrative, and it is certainly not about emoting. I despair when students who visit the House of Commons are asked to write essays about what it might have felt like to be a roundhead, a cavalier or a soldier in the trenches and so on, but have no idea of the context of what they are being asked to empathise with. If they are writing as a soldier in the trenches, they do not know why they are there, what led them there or the end result; it is all about empathising. I sometimes suspect that it is almost an excuse to go on a day trip to the Imperial War museum.

History can be a useful tool. It should not just be about great men and personalities. I hold my hand up as being guilty of studying Weimar Germany for GCSE, A-level and my degree. By the time I took my degree, I could almost recite the name of every Reichstag member in 1932. That was not exactly helpful; it simply showed that it is possible to end up as an anorak, knowing more and more about less and less.

What we admire in good history writing or a good university history course is not necessarily what we should admire in a school syllabus. Often, it is hard to throw off what we acquired in our later years when thinking what we should be trying to achieve in our school system. I spent a happy Christmas indulging myself in the 24-hour existence of Carpatho-Ruthenia, which lasted for most of my Boxing day reading. Although it is a fantastic piece of historical research from Norman Davies, it is not something that I would want to inflict on a group of 11-year-olds.

The question then becomes: should we compel certain periods or topics on a history syllabus? Do we believe that history has a didactic purpose? It is fair to say that many people who teach history have strong, often political views and that, naturally, part of what they want to communicate to their pupils is an enthusiasm for the topic and the period. I cannot remember a single one of my history teachers who did not allow a slight degree of political opinion to sneak out in whatever period they were teaching. Perhaps that is understandable, and it is not always a bad thing, but there are dangers in trying to use school history teaching to communicate values. That is my big fear. Ultimately, history is not about communicating values; it is about communicating skills.

The first, last and only time that I ever studied Anglo-Saxon history was during my first week at secondary school, when we spent a week trying to work out who

10 Jan 2012 : Column 35WH

was buried at Sutton Hoo. I think I came down in favour of King Raedwald. I was probably wrong; we still have no idea, I am sure. I have no desire to go back and read anything more about Anglo-Saxon history, but that one week reminded me that what we are trying to do is assess evidence, reach conclusions and construct an argument. Those are the basic and essential skills that we must absorb when we teach history in schools.

Rehman Chishti: I support my hon. Friend's point. In society now, a fundamental concern is the failure in literacy over the years. Does he agree that history provides a vital opportunity to develop a sustained, lengthy argument, which helps improve literacy?

Paul Maynard: I entirely agree. One of my great frustrations in life is that I discovered how to write an essay only in my last term at university. Unfortunately, it came a bit too late to enhance fully my learning experience during my entire education.

We have to be careful that we do not turn our history lessons and our final history exams—after all, what matters ultimately is what we test—into some sort of quiz or series of multiple choice questions. I have grave reservations about some A-levels. It is to my eternal shame that I got a grade A at A-level politics by just walking in off the street and sitting the exam. I failed to study the subject during the sixth form; I just took it for the fun of it and thought I might get a grade E. It seemed like a fun thing to do. I shocked both myself and the school's head of politics by getting an A, largely because the exam was based entirely on general knowledge as far as I could make out. It asked questions like, "Tick next to the date of the last general election," but I do not think that that was something that needed to be studied.

I think that the skills that history teaches us should be made compulsory up to the age of 16. I support my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood entirely on that point. It is a tragedy that far too many children miss out on the opportunity to study history. We do not need to make history frightening or scary, or obsess about the clichés and the grand narrative of the golden thread of British history.

I represent two seaside towns, the history of which, if we tried to comprise the whole of British history, would not start until 1800, because before that not much was built on Blackpool North and Cleveleys, other than a few mud huts here or there. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) is pulling a face at me as though to say that I am wrong—that would not surprise me—so perhaps the correct date is 1730. None the less, there is immense enthusiasm in Blackpool for local history. We have community heritage champions who, although they are often older people who did not have the chance to study history in the way that we would all perhaps like to do so, get really excited at the chance to learn new oral history techniques.

My constituency has a Jewish cemetery. We no longer have a Jewish community to speak of, but people are fascinated by the cemetery and what it tells them about the sort of people who were active in Blackpool in its heyday. It would be a fantastic tool for local children to learn about the area in which they live. I am a strong supporter of using local history as a way of making history interesting for those who study it.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 36WH

As ever, however, we cannot look at just the baubles on the Christmas tree. There is no point in teaching children about the things that interest and entertain them unless they understand those lock gates on the canals of both British and European history. Until we understand how it all links together, I do not believe that history will achieve the goal that it should be setting itself. We should interest people, but we should not exclude them from fully understanding what makes the country in which they live what it is today.

11.42 am

Sir Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) on securing the debate and on setting the scene, along with the other two previous speakers. Following on from my intervention, I want to emphasise the importance of local history. We have just heard the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) say that although his area has only been in existence for some 200 years, it has its own rich, distinct history. I represent Britain's oldest recorded town. Indeed, parts of the western boundary of my constituency are ancient earthworks that predate the Roman invasion.

I pay tribute to all those schools and history teachers who enthuse young people; the issue is that too few do. I want to place on record my appreciation for my history teacher at St Helena school 55 years ago, Mr Brian Barton, who for some reason was known to his contemporaries as Dick Barton, and who, 55 years later, is a tour guide in Colchester. He is not the only one. We are blessed with contemporary historians, such as Andrew Phillips and Patrick Denney, and Philip Crummy of the Colchester Archaeological Trust, who bring history alive. Two thousand years ago, we had the only Roman chariot circus in Britain; Philip Crummy discovered its remains only in November 2004. That is local history in a national context, and in the context of the Roman empire. I want such aspects of local history to be introduced in schools throughout the country, because I passionately believe, as the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys said, that if we can enthuse young people about local history they are more likely to develop an interest in history as a whole. I share the concern that linking history and geography under the heading of humanities dilutes both.

My town is bidding for city status, so perhaps I will be allowed the opportunity to fly its flag. Colchester was the first capital of Roman Britain, and it is the only city of the Roman era that is not a city today. There is no record of that city status ever having been removed, so I hope that Parliament will conclude that we should keep it.

Rehman Chishti: On history, places and future city status, Medway was home to Lord Nelson, and the flagship Victory was built in the historic dockyard in Gillingham. There is a lot of responsibility not only on schools to promote local history, but on local authorities to promote it in partnership with those schools. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, along with Colchester, there are other richly historic places, such as Medway?

Sir Bob Russell: There are indeed. I am grateful for that intervention. If I were a Norfolk MP, I would point out that Nelson came from the royal county of Norfolk long before he ended up in Kent.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 37WH

I am concerned that, in my home town, not everybody is aware of our patron saint, St Helena, whose badge I proudly wear, or indeed of the history behind her; that is a bit of local history. We are also the home of the fictional character, Moll Flanders—a local girl who did quite well. In fact, she came from the very part of Colchester in which I grew up, Mile End. I think it is time that my home town promoted Moll Flanders, because she was a lively lass and I think she would attract tourism to the town.

Another local historian, Joan Soole, unearthed incredible Colchester connections with the battle of Waterloo, and those local connections brought alive the history of that battle for a completely new generation. We are a famous garrison town and one of the four super-

garrisons, but before we became a garrison town, we had a strong Royal Navy connection with that famous battle. We are also the town in which the world's most famous nursery rhyme was written. In 1805, the Taylor sisters wrote "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star". Again, these things should be promoted locally. Every community has local history to promote.

Chris Skidmore: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman's brief potted history of Colchester, but with respect, I called for this debate to talk about whether history should be compulsory in schools at age 16 or not. I do not know about the views of other Members, but I would appreciate it if the hon. Gentleman would stick to the subject.

Sir Bob Russell: As the three previous speakers have said, the point that needs to be made is that we need to instil enthusiasm in our young people and get the education system to embrace history, because I regret to say—the hon. Gentleman's statistics prove this, and it has not been denied—that interest in history has declined over the past 30, 40 or 50 years. I was lucky with my school teachers, first in my Mile End primary school and then at secondary school, and with my parents. It is all to do with giving encouragement, and getting teachers to be enthusiastic about teaching history.

Tristram Hunt: There is an important point to make about how we attract primary school and early secondary school pupils to the subject, so that they have a passion about the past. At its best, local history is not parochial; it goes from a local story to a national and then international story, but it is very difficult to begin to tell and teach children an international story without those building blocks. Colchester seems a good example of a story about a global imperium.

Sir Bob Russell: I will conclude in a moment, because with one intervention, the hon. Gentleman, to whom I am grateful, has embraced precisely the point that I have been trying to make. We can have anything we like in post-14 or post-16 history, but unless the foundations are there, the rest will not happen. It is up to the Government to provide the enthusiasm and direction. Since my education, experience has shown me that many teachers can be enthused and are enthusiastic. They provide that enthusiasm, and they must not be stopped.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 38WH

11.50 am

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I add my congratulations to those given to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) for securing the debate. It is certainly a very interesting subject, and it has given rise to different opinions around the Chamber.

We have heard about people's experiences with their history teachers, and how teaching particular subjects can create the opposite effect to that intended. Perhaps I should prefix my speech by saying that I was taught not only history but politics by my local Labour party leader. Consequently, I am a Conservative Member of Parliament who knows very little about history. It is perhaps surprising that although we are in the most historic place in the United Kingdom, we are having to remind ourselves about the importance and relevance of history in education. It is something of a cliché, but I strongly feel that it is only by learning from the past that we can understand the present and plan for the future.

Much has been said about the approaches of different countries. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood talked about the teaching of history in Albania and other countries. It is right for history to be taught in different ways in different countries, because that enables each country to see history from its own perspective. It is therefore right that we should learn history from a British perspective. Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) is no longer in this Chamber, but I take issue with his concerns about the patriotism that Conservative MPs often display when talking about history. It is not just Conservative MPs who take a sense of pride in their British heritage; it cuts across right across the political spectrum. Britain has the richest history in the world. If any country needs to prioritise history teaching, it is ours, because an understanding of history helps us to formulate national identity, pride and confidence in who we are.

Kevin Brennan: I am as patriotic as the next man, but does the hon. Gentleman not see that the statement that Britain has the richest history in the world is ludicrous and would not be made by anyone who knew anything about history?

Gareth Johnson: No, I do not agree it is ludicrous at all. More than any other country, Britain has had influence across the entire globe; the fact that English is spoken in more countries than any other language demonstrates the influence that this country has had throughout history. Some of that history is good, and we are very proud of it, and some of it we perhaps do not talk about as much as we should. However, nevertheless, we should be proud of our heritage because it is very distinct. It is certainly the richest of any country I have ever studied and it has influenced more countries than that of any other nation.

Yet it is right to say that the teaching of history in this country is patchy. In some areas, more than three quarters of students do not learn history after they are 14 years of age. We heard about the difference between classes that some people claim exists in relation to the teaching of history. Certainly there are differences between, for example, grammar schools and some comprehensive schools; the teaching levels are not comparable. The teaching of history varies around the countries, too.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 39WH

Although more people are passing GCSE history, fewer students are taking up the subject, which is a great shame.

The treatment of the subject is less patchy around Europe; it is compulsory in most European countries. As I said, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood mentioned Albania. That keeps cropping up, because it appears to be the only country in Europe that takes a similar approach to England with regard to history teaching. I do not know whether it is a fair comparison, but it certainly seems that there is less mandatory teaching of history in England than anywhere else in Europe. The rest of the UK fares little better.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that part of the problem is trying to ensure that history is relevant to young people? Often the teaching of the subject leaves young people either ostracised or simply feeling that it is not relevant to them today. This is not an either/or. Local history needs to be taught, based on its relevance to young people, so that they can understand their place in the national psyche and get a grasp of history.

Gareth Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. It is a case of ensuring that students understand that history, and what has gone on in the past, is relevant to what they are doing now. I think that we would all accept that history at its best is the most fascinating subject on the educational spectrum. However, at its worst, it can be one of the duller. A lot depends on the person in the classroom, and whether they can inspire pupils and convince them that history is so relevant to them, as the hon. Gentleman correctly points out.

[Jim Sheridan *in the Chair*]

To be fair, the Department for Education is doing a lot of good work. The academy innovation goes from strength to strength. We have more protection and support for teachers, with regard to the anonymity that is extended when there are unfounded allegations; also, there has been a withdrawal of the requirement to give notice of periods of detention. In addition, spelling tests are coming back, and we are allowing grammar schools to be expanded.

I would like “more history teaching” to be added to that list of achievements. However, I am the first to accept that the Department for Education faces a dilemma, because it rightly does not wish to be too prescriptive about the curriculum. One of the Department’s aims is to make the curriculum more streamlined. Clearly, the challenge is for the Department to give good schools as much autonomy as it can while ensuring a structured education system for children. Therein lies the future difficulty for the Department in relation to history teaching.

The desire for more British history teaching is not about misplaced patriotism; there is no xenophobic agenda. However, we should not shy away from teaching British history with a sense of pride. For example, the history of the British empire should not be taught with any sense of shame or vitriol. We should allow students

10 Jan 2012 : Column 40WH

to embrace history as seen from a British context, because we will fully understand ourselves only when we learn where we have come from. National identity is incredibly important, and much of that identity is determined by our history.

11.58 am

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) on initiating the debate. He rather gallantly tried to separate two issues: first, how much history should be taught and, secondly, what is taught. However, I do not think he can do that because the case for more time must be related to the subject’s inherent value and the contribution that it makes to pupils.

When I was a young man, I had a passionate interest in history; in fact, it was the only subject that I was particularly good at in school. I lost my enthusiasm when I discovered that the more facts that I managed to acquire to settle historical disputes, the less availing they were as they were assimilated to different theories. I became generally interested in theory and fact, lost my passion for history and acquired a passion for philosophy.

I never taught history when I was a teacher, although I might have had the opportunity to do so, but I was appalled by what I saw and the narrowness of the curriculum. One of my sordid

secrets is that I taught for many years in an independent school. Lots of people did history. They just did the Third Reich over and again. Therefore, what a subject contains has a lot to do with whether it should be taught or taught to everyone. The reasons for that were quite crude in many respects. Putting the Third Reich on the syllabus meant more pupils and more sets. The headmaster often found that there were better results, too. Therefore, there was an incentive that had nothing to do with teaching history; it was all to do with the promotion of teaching careers, if I can put it as crudely as that.

As a result, some people who have done history leave school knowing very little history. They know very little about the development of their own culture and the nation's culture, and have to pick it up through TV or books later on in life. There is an enormous and insatiable appetite out there for history as a form of entertainment—we all know that there is a history channel—but it is regrettable that people who study history can do very little on the Tudors and Stuarts, do nothing on the 18th century and have the most prejudiced views about the mediaeval period.

I think that we all have to accept that, within the space of a school year, people need to be selective. There has to be a selection about which bits of history will be taught. Any full story will, perforce, be something of an outline, but I am concerned about the principles that dominate selection in the school curriculum. Selection is often done on dubious grounds. We moved, slightly, on to that ground in the previous contribution. It can be done simply to reflect a nation's favoured narrative of itself. History then becomes, to some extent, an exercise in self-justification. History can be a bit like autobiography—just a representation of what one would like the world and oneself to believe about the past. Many Governments in the world fall into the trap of sanitising their history curriculum, so that it becomes a very pleasing narrative about how all the things great

10 Jan 2012 : Column 41WH

and good came from their nation. I am sure that if we were in the French Parliament talking about history, we would have similar perceptions—different perceptions, but similar kinds of perception.

Moving away from the Nazis and the Third Reich, therefore, does not necessarily solve what should be in the curriculum. I have concerns about bolting back to what I was familiar with in my school days—the Whig narrative of history, where British history is represented as a seamless path to freedom, starting with Magna Carta, which, regrettably, very few people have actually read. When one actually studies it, it entrenches baronial privileges to provide their own courts and armies. A case was made in those days for choice and diversity. There was choice and diversity in who could provide the army, or who could provide the court, and that is found within Magna Carta. History can be selective in omitting all sorts of things that we would rather not touch on, such as the British role in slavery, or working-class history—the worst aspects of the industrial revolution. They are touched on, but they can be omitted, if we choose to do so, from the curriculum.

There are therefore inherent dangers in being too prescriptive about what sort of narrative falls into the curriculum. It may be unusual for me in this context, but that is why I genuinely favour choice and diversity in the history curriculum and making children self-conscious about the whole process of the writing of history—how these stories come about and how we reflect our narrative. History is very rarely written by the losers. The history of the mediaeval

period was written by the Church and therefore those kings who gave the Church a bad time—King John is a classic example—got a very bad press.

History should contain an outline, but it should also contain opportunities for intelligent history teachers who care for their subject to choose selectively in a way that both suits their candidate interest and aptitudes, but also covers what they think good history should be. I am in favour of making children, through the history curriculum, critically sceptical. If it does that, it is no bad thing.

12.4 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What an interesting seminar we have had this morning on teaching history in schools. There has been a very high standard, as one might expect with so many eminent historians and hon. Members present here to debate the subject. As was revealed earlier, it is true that I taught history, alongside economics, in a comprehensive school for 10 years. In fact, I tweeted that I was going to participate in this debate and one of my former pupils, Cerys Furlong, who is now a Labour councillor in Cardiff—she was indoctrinated well when I was teaching history—tweeted back that she remembered the days when I was an actual history teacher.

[Next Section](#)

I took O-level—as it was in those days—history back in 1976, and I took A-level history in 1978. I always remember one teacher saying to me that I would prefer A-level to O-level because it is about not only regurgitating facts, but understanding, interpretation and so on. I still have, in a cupboard at home, several green exercise books containing the notes from my history A-level lessons, which consisted mainly of our teacher—I will not name him unfairly—standing up for the first half of

10 Jan 2012 : Column 42WH

the lesson and giving a A.J.P. Taylor-type lecture. The second half of the lesson consisted of our writing down the notes that he dictated into those green exercise books. I sometimes wonder whether that is what the Minister with responsibility for schools has in mind when he talks about the sorts of changes he would like to see in our schools and whether, in his mind's eye, he sees rows of pupils sitting down at their individual desks in their short trousers writing down whatever it is that the teacher has asked them to copy down off the board—perhaps in the manner in which the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) deprecated in his speech of copying down facts about the kings and queens of England from the board. I accept that that is a parody, but the reason why I love history, and I think the reason why a lot of people love history, is not because of rote learning, but because of the interest in finding out that people in the past were just like us.

The idea that a diet of key facts and an officially sanctioned version of state history will inspire people or serve their interests is fanciful. We need to ensure that we do not go back to the approach taken when I was learning history at A-level in the 1970s. It was not the regurgitation of facts that caught my imagination about history, but the fascination of how people in the past, who were exactly the same as us biologically, acted in the face of the

beliefs, culture, values and political power structures of the time, and what that told us about ourselves now. For me, that was the reason to study history.

As has been said, by the time I came to do a PGCE in history in 1984, the subject had changed a lot, which has been reflected in today's debate. The Oxford history project and various other initiatives that were taken at the time involved talking about the skills needed to be a historian, assessing the reliability of evidence and, even for young pupils, thinking about what being a historian involves—being a kind of detective of the past. All those initiatives had come into the teaching of history, which was for the good. I looked recently at a careers guidance page for the university of Kent. One interview question for potential history teachers asked how they felt about a skills-based approach versus a factual approach to teaching history. That question, which seems to dominate a lot of the debate about the teaching of history in our schools at the moment, is fairly ludicrous, because teaching history cannot be skills versus facts. It has to be about having the skills to be able to learn, understand and interpret the facts. There is a legitimate concern about a loss of the sense of the narrative of history, which has been picked up in several of the contributions today. However, it would be a big mistake to turn history teaching into the dissemination of a patriotic narrative. It is interesting that there was not unanimity between colleagues from all parties on that.

We should not look at history as a way to mould our citizens into compliant people. We need to go beyond a simple glorification of the past, which I felt the hon. Member for Dartford might have suggested. We need students to be able critically to engage with the past and understand how it affects them now, as individuals, and their community and country. In respect of studying history, the emphasis should not be placed on a particular narrative based merely on a political agenda. We should study history to have a sense of identity beyond race

10 Jan 2012 : Column 43WH

and religion and understand something of a common culture, so that we learn about the past and ourselves as individuals and members of British society.

Sir Bob Russell: I was hoping that the hon. Gentleman would touch on local history, because clearly national exams will only deal with national history. Where does he think that local history fits into the teaching of history in schools, bearing in mind that we are a diverse country and within a county there will be different local history characteristics?

Kevin Brennan: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said, and with what my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt), who is no longer here, said: local history is a way of engaging the interest of pupils and students and enables them to spread out beyond that into a much wider historical context. Like the hon. Member for Colchester, I come from a town—in south Wales—where there are powerful remnants of the Roman empire, including an amphitheatre and a barracks of the second Augustan legion based at the Roman town of Isca, which is now Caerleon. Some 5,000 Roman troops were stationed there in a town that probably does not have a population as large today. It was fascinating for me, as a young person, to think about what it must have been like 2,000 years earlier in the area in which I grew up.

Although the title of the debate is not, “Should we make history compulsory to 16”, I think that is what the hon. Member for Kingswood wanted to focus on in his speech. I congratulate him on securing the debate and on raising that important subject.

One problem with, and paradox of, the Government’s approach to this matter is revealed, in a sense, by what the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Dartford said. The Government say that they are seeking to decentralise education and to have schools that are effectively autonomous and exempted, with choice about what they teach, and if the Government get their way, by the end of this Parliament most schools will be exempt from a national curriculum. Yet they are undertaking a review of the national curriculum and will, presumably, at some point, advance detailed proposals about the national curriculum. Some interim information on that has been provided by the Government. However, by the end of this Parliament, if the Government proceed in the way that they are going at the moment, most schools will not be compelled to teach the national curriculum. If the hon. Gentleman is advocating, on top of that, that more subjects should be made compulsory up to 16—in this case, history—I do not understand the transmission mechanism by which his ambition might be achieved. Exultation is fine, as are nudge-theory approaches, such as the English baccalaureate, but ultimately the hon. Gentleman will not achieve his aim of making history compulsory if it is not possible to implement a transmission mechanism to compel schools to teach that subject.

Chris Skidmore: On transmission—I agree in part with the hon. Gentleman on the curriculum—the point of the curriculum is secondary to assessment, which is increasingly becoming the driver of standards in schools.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 44WH

Parents and their children will look at schools offering high-quality examinations and at the standard that is achieved in those examinations. This relates to my point about creating a narrative of British history GCSE, because I believe that that would be the lever by which parents would be able to look at all schools offering history GCSE—just as they can in respect of GCSE maths, English and science, which all schools have to offer. If history joined that cadre and we were able to ensure that all pupils studied the equivalent of a western canon, instead of a GSCE that focuses only on the Third Reich or Stalin’s Russia, we would have one that allowed pupils to study the narrative of British history.

Kevin Brennan: The hon. Gentleman is right. Many parents will do what he described, but not all of them will. That is why education itself is compulsory: it will not happen just through exhortation or because the Government say that they would like it to happen, or even by the Government employing little nudge mechanisms, such as the English baccalaureate.

I am reserving judgment on whether history should be taught compulsorily up to 16, because I, too, have a fairly open mind about that. History has never been compulsory. When I was 14 years of age, we had to do either history or geography, and we could not opt for both because of the tightness of the options in the school that I attended.

Sir Bob Russell *indicated assent.*

Kevin Brennan: That was common, as I can see from the reaction of the hon. Member for Colchester.

Gareth Johnson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Brennan: I took a long intervention and do not want to eat into the Minister's time. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for not being able to give way one more time.

The Third Reich came up quite a bit during our debate. I confess that teaching that subject started during the time when I was teaching history. I taught up to about the end of 1994 and even back then the Third Reich was a major component of O-level history, which then became GCSE during the time I was teaching. It seems to have generated itself into a kind of educational industry over that period. My daughter, who is doing A-level history, is studying the Third Reich, having studied it at GCSE as well. I share the frustration of other hon. Members about that. Really, schools should not be doing that. I understand why they do it—teachers gain expertise and resources, and so on, and want to give their pupils the best opportunity to pass exams, which is only natural—but it should not be studied over and over, as hon. Members have described.

I shall conclude, because I want to give the Minister an opportunity to respond. We have had an interesting debate with some excellent contributions. **First, I am interested to hear the Minister set out his plans and say whether he has any intention of making teaching history compulsory up to 16.** If that is not his intention, perhaps he will make it clear. Secondly, what is the transmission mechanism by which he is going to get the national curriculum taught if most schools are exempt from it?

10 Jan 2012 : Column 45WH

12.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Nick Gibb): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) on securing this debate, which has been of high quality throughout. All contributions to it were valuable. My hon. Friend is a firm supporter of recognising the importance of history in schools and has played an active role in highlighting some key issues relating to this subject, including in his excellent recent report, which paints a worrying picture of the decline of history in our schools.

I strongly agree with my hon. Friend's view that teaching history should form a key part of a child's education. **As young people develop, taking on the rights and responsibilities of adulthood, they need a good understanding and appreciation of how and why our systems of democracy and justice were developed and established. They also need to understand the aspirations and values that motivated our predecessors to create the society in which we live today.**

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who made an excellent, gripping contribution to this debate, that history is a body of knowledge that allows us to understand where we are. The study of history is also an important academic discipline in primary schools and at key stages 3 and 4 at secondary school. As well as providing knowledge, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) set out in interventions, it helps to develop pupils' skills at reading, précising text and essay writing, which cannot just be left to the English curriculum in a school. It is about developing the skills of scholarship, which are important in a school career.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood has written a number of excellent history books, including studies of Edward VI and Queen Elizabeth I. He would therefore have been as shocked as me to find that, in a survey of history undergraduates entering a Russell group university, only one in three knew who the monarch was during the armada. In the same survey, almost 90% of the undergraduates could not name a single British Prime Minister from the 19th century. Professor Matthews, who conducted the survey, said that the students were “studying at one of the Russell group of universities, on courses where the entry requirement is an A and two Bs at A level, which probably places them in the top 15% of their generation in terms of educational qualifications. This implies that, all things being equal, 85% of my undergraduates’ age group know even less than they do. In other words, we are looking at a whole generation that knows almost nothing about the history of their (or anyone else’s) country.”

As my hon. Friend highlighted in his report, **the decline in the number of pupils taking history GCSE in this country is a matter of concern.** In 1995, more than 223,000 pupils, representing nearly 40% of pupils, were taking history GCSE. By 2010, this figure had dropped by more than 25,000, so it is now only 31% of pupils, or just less than a third, taking the subject. If we scrutinise that decline further, as my hon. Friend has, we see a worrying trend around the clear divisions in GCSE take-up between different types of school and pupil background and in whether they are eligible for free school meals. As the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) said, a potential class divide is being created in this country with the subjects that are being studied.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 46WH

For example, nearly 20% more pupils in the independent sector study history than pupils in maintained schools. My hon. Friend’s report also highlighted the links to deprivation reflected in the take-up of history at GCSE. For example, in 2010 only 25% of black pupils took history GCSE compared with 31% of white pupils; only 18% of pupils eligible for free school meals studied the subject at GCSE level, which is 13% less than the percentage take-up for pupils overall, at 31%. **The decline in the study of history has also been reflected in further and higher education, with the proportion of students opting for A-level history remaining static for a number of years. Enrolments in history at university are well below the average compared with other subjects.**

I agree with my hon. Friend that the current history curriculum does not give pupils a grasp of the narrative of the past. Last year’s Ofsted survey of history teaching in schools, to which he referred, supports that view. It found that in primary schools, although pupils generally had good knowledge of particular topics and episodes in history, chronological understanding and the ability to make links across the knowledge gained were significantly weaker. It is also clear that many schools are spending less time teaching history. In the recent Historical Association survey of secondary school history teachers, lack of teaching time was the most frequently cited issue that teachers raised about key stage 3, which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central, who I am glad to see is back in the Chamber having met his constituent, mentioned in his excellent contribution. Part of the problem is that GCSE history is too narrowly focused, with exam choices clustering around certain topics such as the American west 1840 to 1895 or the Third Reich, which has been referred to by many hon. Members. Exams have a significant influence over what is taught, so it is no surprise that pupils have huge gaps in their knowledge of our national story and a disconnected sense of narrative.

There are also issues with teacher training. Last year's Ofsted report also cited that in most of the primary schools visited, there was not enough subject-specific expertise or professional development to help teachers to be clearer about the standards expected in the subject. I hope that we agree that it is fundamental that a greater emphasis is needed on knowledge and content in the current school curriculum, which is why we have launched a review of the national curriculum.

John Pugh: The Minister has mostly outlined the decline in history as taught in all sorts of schools. Will he touch on the causal factors? He has not explained what appears to be an appreciable decline, as documented by the hon. Member for Kingswood.

Mr Gibb: There are all kinds of reasons why the decline has happened. It could be, for example, because of the move to a more skills-based approach. History might be regarded as a tougher subject in which to achieve the grades that a school feels that it needs to achieve to maintain or increase its position in the school league tables. We have had a concern for a number of years about the move to what are called softer subjects in order to boost league table positions, and history could well have been a victim of that process.

The new national curriculum will be based on a body of essential knowledge that children should be expected

10 Jan 2012 : Column 47WH

to acquire in key subjects during the course of their school career. It will embody for all children their cultural and scientific inheritance, and it will enhance their understanding of the world around them and expose them to the best that has been thought and written. We are engaging with a wide range of academics, teachers and other interested parties to ensure that the new national curriculum compares favourably with those of the highest performing countries in the world.

Sir Bob Russell: As yet there has been no reference to the importance of local history being taught in our schools. How will that fit in, when schools are clearly being directed towards history that fits the exams?

Mr Gibb: Those are precisely the issues for consideration by the national curriculum review.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood would like history to be compulsory to 16, which is one of the things that the national curriculum review will consider. As I said at the outset, it is clear that some subjects, such as history, which all pupils should have a good grasp of, have been less popular choices at GCSE. The Government therefore want to encourage more children to take up history beyond the age of 14, particularly among disadvantaged pupils and certain ethnic groups. That is why we introduced the English baccalaureate, which will recognise the work of pupils who achieve an A* to C in maths, English, two sciences, a language and either history or geography, to encourage more widespread take-up of those core of subjects, which provide a sound basis for academic progress.

The English baccalaureate has already had a significant impact on the take-up of history: according to a NatCen survey of nearly 700 schools, 39% of pupils sitting GCSEs in 2013 in the schools responding will be taking history GCSE, up eight percentage points and back to

the 1995 level of history up-take. There are clear benefits to pupils in taking the subjects combined in the E-bac. Pupils who have achieved that combination of subjects have proved more likely to progress to A-level than those with similar attainment in different subjects in the

10 Jan 2012 : Column 48WH

past. They have also attempted a greater number of A-levels and achieved better results. We are also committed to restoring confidence in GCSEs as rigorous and valued qualifications. We will reform GCSEs to ensure that they are more keenly focused on essential knowledge in those key subjects, and with exams at the end of the course to support good teaching and in-depth study.

To refer to the questions of the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), what we want to achieve from the national curriculum review is a curriculum that is so good that the academies will want to adopt it, albeit not being compulsory. The national curriculum also does feed in to statutory testing, in maths and English at the end of key stage 2 and the GCSE specifications.

Kevin Brennan: Is the Minister considering writing into funding agreements the requirement that academy schools should teach the national curriculum?

Mr Gibb: No, that would obviate some of the freedoms and the whole essence of academy schools. The funding agreements require the teaching of maths, science and English to 16, thus making them compulsory, but the application of the national curriculum is not compulsory for academies, although it feeds into the specification that determines what is tested and assessed through the GCSE system. In that sense, there is an imperative for schools to teach those subjects.

The essence of the national curriculum review is to produce a curriculum that is on a par with the best in the world, based on evidence of what is taught in those jurisdictions that have the best education systems and against whom graduates from this country's schools will be competing for jobs in the future. The national curriculum, which will be published and available to parents, will be of such a quality that it will become the norm and the benchmark against which parents will judge the quality of their schools.

Finally, I want to touch on the part that teachers play in our school systems as far as history is concerned.

Jim Sheridan (in the Chair): Order. We now come to the next debate.

10 Jan 2012 : Column 49WH

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201212/cmhansrd/cm120110/halltext/120110h0001.htm>