

# Harper's Vision of the Future Requires Reshaping of the Past

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## *Harper's Vision of the Future Requires Reshaping of the Past*

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STEPHEN HARPER'S EFFORTS to reshape what is researched, taught, and presented as Canadian history need to be viewed in the context of this prime minister's larger and very illiberal agenda to shape the Canadian present and future.

Despite the embrace of neoliberal policies by both Progressive Conservative and Liberal governments in the 1980s and 1990s, Harper, as president of the National Citizens' Coalition, claimed in 2000 that "Canada appears content to become a second-tier socialistic country, boasting ever more loudly about its economy and its social services to mask its second rate status." Shortly afterwards, his name appeared first on the "firewall" letter to Premier Ralph Klein calling for Alberta to become a semi-sovereign state in order to stand up to centralizing, socializing Liberal federal governments.

Alberta, which had gone further than the federal government in rolling back the postwar welfare state and unashamedly declaring the right of capital to rule without state mediation on behalf of the public, was salvation to Harper. And when he re-entered federal politics, his goal was to spread the Alberta model to the federal sphere rather than contain it behind a firewall.

In my view, the attack of the Harper government on the independence of scientists, on all suggestions that the tar sands produce climate change, on proper statistics gathering, on sociology, on the welfare state, and on limits to the movement of capital lead naturally to the need to reshape our national history and national identity. How can he lead us to a brave new world of muscular entrepreneurship and manly attacks against nations that, for whatever reason, seem a threat to his aggressive capitalist agenda if we think of ourselves as a country of apologetic, moderate, caring peacemongers?

That national image is indeed overdrawn and, where it suits his agenda, Harper does try to confirm its mythologies. "We have no history of colonialism," he told a press conference in Pittsburgh in 2009 at the announcement that Canada would host the G20 meeting in 2010. He knows better, but his overall message is that Canadians have little for which to atone except perhaps the forced sending of Native children to residential schools that Paul Martin has correctly labeled "cultural genocide." So he cuts funds to Library and Archives Canada and Parks Canada that go to providing the means and the products that depict a history of diversity and controversy. And he tries to turn our Museum of Civilization into a Canadian Museum of History focused on honouring Canadian heroes and achievers, the forerunners of today's intrepid Canadian global entrepreneurs who are, of course, never engaged in colonialism. Meanwhile he invests \$28 million in an effort to create a history of

the War of 1812 without nuance and with intervention by the PMO with the Department of Canadian Heritage in every detail, including what dress the actress portraying Laura Secord should be wearing. He launches an investigation into provincial practices in the teaching of history to see whether certain World War I and World War II battles are emphasized. This kind of shallowing of the history pool leads to fantasyland history, to go with the fantasyland science and sociology that this government's restrictive practices favour, and it needs to be opposed in the name of legitimate inquiry and rational thought.

The recently published draft of the Canadian Museum of History's Research Strategy for the next ten years provides a vivid demonstration of the limited kind of history that the current government and its top civil servants in the area of historical research wish to allow. The Museum strategy, at the moment, spells out a small number of anniversaries that should be celebrated during the upcoming decade: the 150th birthday of Confederation, the 100th anniversary of the First World War, and the 75th anniversary of World War II. Accepting for the sake of argument that a focus on specific events as opposed to broad social themes is an acceptable approach for the new museum, it is striking that all the events chosen involve either state-level activities within Canada or international events involving actions by a variety of states. Where in this list of important anniversaries are events that involved grassroots organization? For example, where are working people? Why are the general strikes of 1919, beginning with the Winnipeg General Strike, unworthy of celebration or analysis? Both in Canada and in Europe, "Red 1919" was an important phenomenon with important ramifications for both the people and the states where uprisings occurred. The centennial of these events occurs over the next decade.

Working people do not appear anywhere in the strategy document. Their efforts to form unions, to strike, to organize politically, and in general to attempt to create a different social order do not fit in with the Harper government's social vision. Once they received a majority in the House of Commons, the Conservatives moved quickly to remove in practice the right of workers in federally controlled sectors to strike. In June 2011, striking flight attendants were ordered back to work after only two days on strike, while locked-out postal workers were legislated back after a single day on picket lines and at a rate below the worst offer made by the employer. In March 2012, legislation prevented Air Canada pilots from striking. Two months later it was the turn of CP Rail workers to be deprived of the right to strike after five days of a work stoppage.

The Tories in the House then demonstrated their hostility to unions by singling them out as organizations that would have to provide a detailed online accounting of all transactions over \$5000. The Senate balked at this unfair legislation. But the Harperites had more anti-union legislation in mind. In July 2013, a Conservative MP announced that he was introducing a motion to make it possible for members of unions in federal jurisdictions to opt out of

their unions. Similar “right to work” legislation has crippled the trade union movement in many American states. Apart from its anti-union legislation, the Harper government has been responsible for a significant increase in the number of temporary foreign workers within the country – their numbers increased from 150,000 in 2006 to 340,000 at the end of 2012. Studies of the treatment of these workers have demonstrated that a majority of the employers making use of the program take advantage of these workers’ vulnerability and often ignore provincial labour laws, including occupational health and safety rules, when they deal with their “TFWs.” Indeed, the unwillingness to accept that people who are good enough to work for Canadians are good enough to be citizens demonstrates the Conservatives’ rather limited commitment to human rights for many of the working people who live within Canada’s borders.

With such a sorry record of unconcern for Canada’s current work force, it is hardly surprising that the Harper government and its appointees in the museum sector are not prepared to celebrate working people’s past in Canada and particularly the militancy and even revolutionary spirit of workers at various times such as during the 1919 general strike period.

It is ultimately pointless for historians to whine that their institutions are under attack by the Harper government and suggest that that government does not recognize the role that historians have played in helping Canadians to connect with their past. It knows that role all too well, just as it knows that environmental researchers in government and in universities as well as researchers at Statistics Canada have often produced research that casts doubt on the policy agenda of the Harper government, which is tied very closely to the needs of big business. There is a clear clash of social values between those who believe in free inquiry, evidence-based research, and humanist values, on the one hand, and those who believe mainly in the values of profit seeking and propaganda to support those values, on the other. All those who are on the humanist side need to work together, regardless of their disciplines or social backgrounds. They are too weak on their own to make much of a dent on the public and indeed when they fail to work together, they all seem like self-interested, narrow specialists. They need to recognize that they have a common agenda and a common enemy whom united they can defeat or at least prevent from doing as much damage as it would like. Those who want to defend open and broad inquiry into the past need to work closely with those who want to defend open and broad inquiry into the present and options for the future.