

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



History Under Harper

Leaving Québec, and Much Else, Outside Canada

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Volume 73, Spring 2014

Forum: History Under Harper

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1025178ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Noël, A. (2014). History Under Harper: Leaving Québec, and Much Else, Outside Canada. *Labour / Le Travail*, 73, 210–212.

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History Under Harper: Leaving Québec, and Much Else, Outside Canada

Alain Noël

THE OCTOBER 2013 SPEECH from the Throne offered a good summary of the vision of Canada promoted by the Harper government. Canadians, read the Governor General, “draw inspiration” from their founders, from whom they have inherited “a legacy of freedom, the birthright of all humanity, and the courage to uphold it; the rule of law, and the institutions to protect it; respect for human dignity and diversity.”¹

These founders belonged to Aboriginal peoples, they were French, English, or came later from all over the world, but they “looked beyond narrow self-interest” and “stroved together” to build “an independent country where none would have otherwise existed.” And this country took its almost perfect and practically definitive form with Confederation, which endowed Canadians with strong and balanced institutions. Following Confederation, our history simply unfolded, to become primarily one of engagement and courage during war times. Our values were already enshrined, our character forged, and our collective path determined.

Consider, for instance, the following condensation of Canadian history:

As we look confidently to the future, we draw great strength from our past. Beginning with our Aboriginal peoples, Canada’s story is one of risk, sacrifice, and rugged determination. From the founding of New France, to the fight for Canada in the War of 1812, from the visionary achievement of Confederation, to our victory at Vimy Ridge, Canadians have repeatedly triumphed over long odds to forge a great country, united and free.²

Only wars moved this country during the 20th century. There was no fight for Aboriginal rights and self-determination, no mobilization over female suffrage or reproductive rights, no labour movement, no welfare state, no official bilingualism or multiculturalism, no Charter of Rights and, for all practical purposes, no Québec. No Harold Cardinal, no Nellie McClung, no Henry Morgentaler, no Madeleine Parent, no Tommy Douglas and, of course, no Pierre Elliott Trudeau or René Lévesque.

Am I making too much of a short speech? Not really. All the historical events that the federal government plans to celebrate in the coming years have to do with Confederation or with wars, with the exception of a memorial to the victims of communism, which indeed also relates to a war, the Cold War. Step by step, the government is rewriting the history of Canada, to downplay

1. Governor General, *Seizing Canada’s Moment: Prosperity and Opportunity in an Uncertain World; Speech from the Throne* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, October 16, 2013), 3.

2. *Seizing Canada’s Moment*, 21.

its progressive, liberal, or multinational dimensions and to highlight instead its conservative, royalist, and military origins.

This operation goes much beyond calculated omissions or monarchist and military celebrations. In a number of ways, the federal government is actively amending the facts and obscuring the past. On the web, for instance, much of what took place before 2006 is gradually disappearing.

Take, for instance, the now defunct National Council of Welfare. This was a rare and precious autonomous body designed to advise the federal government on matters of poverty and social development. Created in its definitive form by a 1969 Act of Parliament, the Council proved extremely useful in producing, year after year, reliable data on welfare incomes in the provinces. In its last published report, for instance, for the year 2009, one could find that a single employable person on welfare in New Brunswick received as income 26 per cent of the low income threshold determined by the Market Basket Measure, compared to 64 per cent in Newfoundland and Labrador, 52 per cent in Québec, and 48 per cent in Ontario.³ Whereas in most provinces, single persons on welfare got about half of what it would have taken to escape poverty, in New Brunswick they received half of that half. Because of the abolition by the Conservative government of the National Council of Welfare in 2012, for the years after 2009 we cannot tell. Not only was this institution destroyed, but its website, which contained a wealth of information going back many years, was closed almost immediately. It is still possible, with lots of patience and the guidance of Gilles Séguin, a former civil servant who monitors social policy developments in Canada, to track down the Council's publications.⁴ But they are far from sight and difficult to retrieve, buried deep in federal archives.

As a political scientist working on social policy, I run into this problem regularly. Recently, for instance, I have been unable to find a document produced in 1998 by the Applied Research Branch of Human Resources Development Canada, which I quoted in an earlier publication and for which I had the full reference.⁵ I had similar problems with a 2006 document from the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada; like the National Council of Welfare material, it can be retraced in archives, but only if one knows exactly what one is looking for.⁶

3. National Council of Welfare, *Welfare Incomes 2009* (Ottawa: National Council of Welfare, 2010), A-15 and A-16.

4. See <http://www.canadiansocialresearch.net/ncw.htm>.

5. Human Resources Development Canada, Applied Research Branch, Strategic Policy, *An Analysis of Employment Insurance Benefit Coverage*, Document W-98-35E, (Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada, October 1998).

6. Erin O'Sullivan, *The Community Well-Being (CWB) Index: Well-Being in First Nations Communities, 1981-2001 and into the Future* (Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, February 2006).

This gradual removal of the recent past may not be so surprising coming from a government that has undermined an information and governance tool as central as the census and, more broadly, has eroded the country's scientific and knowledge capacity. But these practices point to the many ways in which history can be rewritten.

As the process goes on, it is a certain understanding of Canada that tends to vanish, a country that with many difficulties and failures gradually moved away from its origins as a British colony, to come to terms with its inherent diversity and the requirements of a complex contemporary, multinational democracy. As this happens, modern-day Québec also vanishes from the Canadian script.

Before the Conservatives came to power, the place of Québec in Canada's stories of peoplehood was far from assured. The constitutional impasse that defined the country was a lasting testimony to this difficulty, as were the regular reiterations of the constitutional stalemate scenario in cases like the 1999 Social Union Framework Agreement, for instance. Nevertheless, Québec continued to occupy an important place in the governance of the country and in its self-understanding. This is less and less the case, as Canada celebrates openly its monarchist traditions, its military accomplishments, and its attachment to the global anglo-sphere.

The history of Canada revisited by the Harper government does make room for a recognition of "the Québécois as a nation within a united Canada," but the odd use of French in this notion indicates clearly that what is recognized is not a modern, complex nation within Canada, but a cultural/ethnic identity built into the broad Canadian mosaic. There is no room in the federal government's new vision for the Quiet Revolution, for contemporary Québec culture, or for the province's distinct social institutions and practices.

One could argue that, in the end, such perspectives do not matter all that much. The Harper government is indeed doing far worse than rewriting the country's record. This government is undermining or destroying key public and social institutions, eroding the country's scientific and intellectual infrastructure, pushing for a less fair, more unequal Canada, and governing with a total disregard for the environment and for the global consequences of our actions. Rewriting the country's history is an integral part of this process. And it is not merely symbolic, as can be seen with the debasing of the census or the deletion of unwelcome sites and documents on the web.

In an open society, however, the government is never the only agent to put forward a story of peoplehood. Intellectuals, social actors, and other governments also have a say. As historians and political scientists, it is our duty to keep a critical eye on what happens to Canadian history under Harper. But it is also our role to put forward or help promote more appropriate versions of our many stories of peoplehood.