

# The Politics of History Under Harper

Yasmeeen Abu-Laban

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[See table of contents](#)

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## *The Politics of History Under Harper*

**Yasmeen Abu-Laban**

SINCE COMING TO POWER IN 2006 (first as a minority government, and as of 2011 with a majority) the Conservatives of Prime Minister Stephen Harper have made a number of policy changes. Some of these changes are part of a longer progression; for example, today's growing reliance on temporary workers is actually a trend dating back to the 1980s in Canadian immigration policy. Other changes are more brazen: consider the abandonment of the mandatory long-form census questionnaire or the 2011 decision that made Canada the first signatory to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol on international climate change. In contrast to such readily evident policy changes, the Harper Conservatives' approach to Canadian history may at first glance seem rather nebulous. In fact, however, the Harper Conservatives have been involved in a conscious, explicit, and top-down effort to reshape the public symbols and representations of Canadian history, citizenship, and identity. As a consequence, and in addition to longstanding scholarly reasons for conversation across the humanities and social sciences divide, there is a compelling rationale to specifically bring historians and political scientists together in the context of today's Canada to consider "history under Harper."

In what follows, I address one specific and concerning trend, and that is public representations of Canada which reflect a singular narrative of Canadian history rather than narratives (in the plural). In October 2012, the Harper Conservatives announced a plan to transform the Canadian Museum of Civilization into a new Canadian Museum of History. This plan is still under development and will only be fully unveiled in 2017 in conjunction with the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Confederation. But already the plan has raised protests, including from the Canadian Association of University Teachers, which fears an attempt to displace the past focus of the Canadian Museum of Civilization on social history.

Since the 1970s, Canadian social historians have produced an incredibly rich body of scholarship concerned with understanding the experiences and narratives of diverse collectivities that were traditionally marginalized – like women, workers, minorities, immigrants, Indigenous peoples, and children. The findings of such scholarship, which puts a stress on ordinary people, clearly does something different than other branches of history (such as military, diplomatic or intellectual history). Moreover, such scholarship has also challenged perspectives in the social sciences that ignore the experiences, concerns, and agency of marginalized collectivities by only focusing on élites, institutions, or abstract structures. Additionally, the findings of social history have made it possible for educators not only in universities, but also in classrooms from kindergarten to high school, to bring a wider range of materials

and experiences to bear on teaching social studies in Canada's increasingly diverse schools.

The apparent rebranding of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (and threatened undermining of social history) is not a discrete event confined to the national capital region. In fact, there is a remaking of Canadian history and symbolism that is being finessed in a variety of arenas. Moreover, the remaking of Canadian history and symbolism exhibits a clear pattern in which military history and patriotic citizenship are valorized over social history and multicultural citizenship. Perhaps this is most clearly illustrated in the new citizenship guide, *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*, which was first released in 2009. In this guide, military events, military figures, and the British monarchy assume a superordinate status in both text and image. It is worth recalling that in his capacity as Minister for Immigration and Multiculturalism, Jason Kenney presented this guide as aimed not only at new immigrants studying for the citizenship test but at the national memory of all Canadians. Since such Canadian historical realities as the World War II internment of Japanese Canadians and the state-church run residential schools for Aboriginal children are treated as unfortunate mistakes on an otherwise praiseworthy record, it would be hard to escape concluding that the past, and all that is good and glorious, stems from war and empire. Put differently, it seems to be militarized patriotism, and pride in Canada's colonial ties to Britain, that underline the Conservative government's construction of the national memory of a "good Canadian citizen," whether that citizen is born in Canada or abroad.

The valorization of patriotic citizenship is a thematic in numerous speeches given by Stephen Harper and Jason Kenney since the Conservatives first came to power in 2006. Such valorization was also evident in the \$28,000,000 committed to commemorating the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812. This financial outlay was notable given that it came in the middle of a growing international and domestic discourse on "austerity," as well as federal cuts to Library and Archives Canada, an important institution charged with keeping actual records of Canada's past. The recording of Canada's present has also been compromised as a result of both the Harper Conservatives' obliteration of the mandatory long form census questionnaire and of dramatic cuts to Statistics Canada, the agency charged with helping us better understand Canada's population and social, economic, linguistic, and cultural trends. Less reliable information (evident in the many disclaimers that now accompany data analysis of the 2011 census) means less ability to provide statistically sound contemporary portrayals of Canada's ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity, as well as a restricted ability to examine socioeconomic inequality based on such factors as gender, race, and income.

It may well be that the invitation to consider Canada's full complexity and diversity is what the Conservatives really are seeking to avoid, both in symbolism and through cuts to the very institutions, like Statistics Canada and

Library and Archives Canada, that can help track it. Perhaps what is at stake is best symbolically reflected in the new \$20 bill, released at the end of 2012. In keeping with the thematic of patriotic citizenship, adorning the backside of the bill is an image devoted to the World War I battle of Vimy Ridge. But equally significant is that Vimy Ridge replaced the image of Aboriginal artist Bill Reid's famous sculpture, *Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, which had adorned previous currency. It is worth noting that this sculpture, featuring mythic animals and human figures drawn from Haida legend, is one that reflects on all living beings and cultures. That these beings were fated to be forever in the same boat was viewed by many observers as a potent symbol for Canada's complexity as a settler-colony with repeated waves of immigration.

Commemorating military history is not in and of itself a problem and neither are discussions of empire. Indeed, there are many critical questions that could be raised in discussions of war as well as Canada's colonial past and present. The question is whether military history is all that should be primarily commemorated and stressed in public documents, public institutions and public symbols. It seems apparent that we are in a moment when Canadians seem to be asking again – just as was done in the 1960s – how ought our public institutions, our national museums, and even our guides to citizenship depict Canada, and who will contribute to and control this characterization?

I will conclude by giving three reasons why I see it important to have public recognition of social history. First, as a political scientist I have looked at the demands for multiculturalism in Canada over many years. And these demands reflect on the fact that people – diverse collectivities – want to see themselves in public institutions and in the telling of the past and the present. Right now, it would seem that many Canadians – including many Aboriginal people, Québécois, and racialized minorities – would have a hard time finding themselves in Harper's national narrative.

Second, Canadian politics and political discourse have been shaped by different and sometimes even clashing historical narratives. It is a disservice to our understanding of Canada, our understanding of others, and even ultimately our shared political community, to not attend to this.

Finally, at a scholarly level, thanks to work over many decades, we have a considerable and growing body of research that covers social history, and it would be patently superficial and anti-intellectual to ignore it. In response to a challenging question concerning what causes violence, Stephen Harper implored Canadians in 2013 not to “commit sociology,” suggesting a deep disdain for what the social sciences have to offer our understanding of Canada and the world. In contrast, I think now more than ever we need and will benefit from the full range of understandings that come from what is done collectively in the social sciences and humanities, including political science and history.