

Labour
Journal of Canadian Labour Studies
Le Travail
Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Introduction

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Volume 73, printemps 2014

Forum: History Under Harper

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1025173ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Bryden, P. E. & James, M. (2014). Introduction. *Labour / Le Travail*, 73, 195–196.

PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

Forum: History Under Harper

Introduction

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HISTORIANS OF, SAY, 19TH OR EARLY 20TH-CENTURY labour would certainly not be surprised to encounter monarchism, militarism, and manliness as the raw materials of an invented national tradition pushed by a faux-nostalgic elite. That this description captures at least something of the state of official national identity discourses in contemporary Canada is a bit more perplexing. In the following short essays, a group of twelve distinguished historians and political scientists grapples with the manifold political and interpretive challenges of this perplexity.

“History Under Harper” was the title of the joint roundtable of the Canadian Historical Association and Canadian Political Science Association that we organized for the 2013 meetings of the Canadian Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities held at the University of Victoria. Struck by the audacity and persistence of Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s use of royalist and martial touchstones to attempt a sweeping reinvention of Canadian identity, we asked ten contributors (five each from the disciplines of history and political science) to address “History Under Harper” in three-minute “micro-lectures.” Two commentators from political science and history, Avigail Eisenberg and Bryan Palmer, were recruited to reflect on the proceedings as a whole.

Just as the final preparations for Congress were being made, however, there was another twist in the progress of the Harper government’s embrace of history. At the end of April 2013, the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage – a twelve-member committee of the House of Commons that included seven Conservative MPs, four NDP members and one Liberal – met to discuss how history is taught. That *in camera* session resulted in the decision to commence a thorough review of “significant aspects in Canadian history”

that would ominously include “a breakdown and comparison of relevant standards and courses of study offered in primary and post-secondary institutions in each of the provinces and territories.” Historians were outraged. It seemed important to hold another forum specifically dealing with the proposed history review during the Congress proceedings, this time at a public venue and designed to open up the discussion beyond the confines of the academy. Both sessions were extraordinarily well-attended and exciting interdisciplinary events; we are delighted that so many of the participants, including the two commentators, have agreed to put their thoughts to paper for this special forum.

Although Canadian officialdom’s new emphasis on militarism has certainly begun to attract scholarly attention, it is also urgent to think more synoptically, about both the sheer diversity of the reshaping of identity underway in Conservative Canada and about the overarching role of history in the enterprise. The Heritage Committee’s review of how history is taught in Canadian schools; the unprecedented anniversary celebrations of the War of 1812; the revision of the Canadian Citizenship Guide to emphasize the military and the Crown instead of peacekeeping and citizen rights; the abandonment of the cultural-cum-anthropological focus of the former Canadian Museum of Civilization as it becomes the Museum of Canadian History; the restoration of the prefix “Royal” to the various segments of the Canadian armed forces – these initiatives, and many cognate others, need to be understood and assessed as an interrelated ensemble.

While exploring their own particular concerns and foci, the contributions in this special forum provide precisely this sort of panoptic view. While none emerge as cheerleaders for the Conservative enterprise that we might call “Warrior Nation Goes to Downton Abbey,” the diversity of interpretations and assessments among them is striking. The contributors disagree on the logic and coherence of history-under-Harper; its likely durability and long-run impact; the extent to which it is purely Harper’s affair or rather a phenomenon with deeper historical and sociological roots; how opponents ought best to respond; and even whether Canadian academia is victim or villain in the enterprise.

But now it is time to let the authors speak for themselves. We hope that you will enjoy engaging as much as we have with positions that are certain to play central roles in debates about “History under Harper” for years to come.