

Remarks on the Harper Government's Review of History

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THE RECENTLY ANNOUNCED House of Commons Heritage Committee's review of history programs, and other related activities of the current federal government, have captured the attention of Canada's professional historians and other Canadians. Any governmental initiatives in Canadian history deserve our considered attention, especially when they involve efforts by the federal government to influence the study of history, and so this collection compiled by Penny Bryden and Matt James is timely. Regarding the implications of the Committee's review I will focus my remarks on two aspects: the Canadian Historical Association's position, and my own experience as a public historian as it relates to the representation of the past in federal programs devoted to Canadian history.

In the minutes of its 29 April 2013 meeting the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage said it was initiating "a thorough and comprehensive review of significant aspects in Canadian history." The Committee did not state its reasons for the review but its concerns are implicit in the highlighted list of topics in the minutes. Heavily weighted to military topics, the minutes conspicuously omitted other major areas of Canadian history, especially social history, which has been perhaps the dominant sub-field of scholarly historical research on Canada's history over the last 40 years. In that period social historians have documented numerous dimensions of the previously neglected histories of women, working people, Aboriginal peoples, immigrant communities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, among other previously neglected groups. These important aspects of our past, and the associated historiography which has changed how we think about Canadian history, need to be included among the issues to be examined by the Committee. There can be no turning back the clock on the knowledge advances of the historical discipline over the last two generations.

Since the debate at the Standing Senate Committee on National Defence and Veterans' Affairs and its recommendations on the question of the Bomber Command panels at the Canadian War Museum several years ago, representatives of the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) have been vigilant about attempts by political bodies to revise or rewrite our country's history. When the Heritage Committee's review of history was announced, the CHA responded quickly with a letter to the Committee, the issuing of a press release and an interview with CBC Radio. The CHA recognizes the Heritage Committee's prerogative to undertake reviews of culture and heritage programs under federal jurisdiction and would not prejudice the current review. However, the review could only aspire to credibility if this process were professionalized, drawing

on the knowledge and insights of Canada's professional community of historians, and related disciplines of archaeology, anthropology and others.

The notion that small "p" politics might factor into government-sponsored or government-directed historical studies does not come as a surprise. Conservative governments have promoted the study of élite historical figures such as political or military heroes, while progressive administrations have occasionally promoted the history of historically marginalized groups, such as women and Aboriginal people. Yet both conservative and progressive administrations have been excessively focused on the nation-state, expressing a common political agenda of patriotic flag-waving. Provided that government historians and other professionals charged with carrying out federal history projects are scrupulous in following the rules of evidence in their research, fair in the treatment of alternative interpretations, and pluralistic in including different or alternative perspectives, political motives do not necessarily pose a problem. What is problematic is the writing or interpretation of history as an exercise in promoting a particular view of the country while suppressing or drowning out other voices.

The Committee states that it will be enlisting "witness testimony, including firsthand accounts of significant periods" of Canadian history. The CHA encourages the wide-ranging study of Canadian history in all its diversity. If so, it is essential that the witnesses include representatives of the major professional historical associations who are best placed to help ensure a fair and balanced approach to the identification of significant periods as well as to the important role of Canada's regions and diverse communities in our country's history.

It is clear that the CHA would oppose any attempt to promote a particular version of history at the expense of other perspectives. However, beyond a few die-hard conservatives, there is probably not much appetite in the historical profession for revisiting the binary constructions of the so-called history wars of the 1990s, which pitted military and political history in an imagined adversarial relationship to social and cultural history.

My own experience as a public historian reinforces the positions taken by the CHA. Having carried out several projects for Veterans Affairs Canada at the Canadian National Vimy Memorial and the Newfoundland Beaumont-Hamel Memorial in France, I have long held great respect for Canada's military history and traditions. However, our concepts of military history are also rapidly changing with the emergence of numerous topics unanticipated even a generation ago, such as the role of women and racial minorities in the 20th-century wars, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among combatants, and the campaign to root out lesbian and gay soldiers during World War II and the Cold War eras. In numerous meetings with historians of Aboriginal, ethno-cultural, women's and LGBT communities over the last ten years, comprising both professional and vernacular practice, I have learned that these communities often view our histories in very different ways than the nationalists whose

preoccupation has been to promote history as an instrument of patriotism and national unity.

In my view, any attempt to harness historical study to a particular ideological agenda is questionable, especially when applied to school or curriculum programs, risking turning history into a vehicle of indoctrination. This is not to say that big-picture narratives are of no value but rather that the big picture is constantly in flux. The old master narratives developed to promote and unify the nation state hold limited relevance today for the growing diversity of Canada's peoples and their histories. If we value systematic study and evidence-based approaches to historical knowledge, we will need to be prepared to continually revisit the national narratives and try to include new histories that have been unearthed, which sometimes add to but often revise our perspectives on the larger narratives of the nation-state.

Every Canadian is free to interpret our history as they see fit but no public official, whether a minister of the crown or a member of a parliamentary committee, has the right to design or implement public policies dictating which stories or groups of people merit inclusion in our country's history and which ones do not. Canada's history is not a private commodity to be monopolized by an interest group or political party. It is a common inheritance shared by everyone that must be continuously debated and negotiated between and across a spectrum of groups and interests. We must remain committed to fostering historical research, production, and interpretation reflecting the great diversity of Canada and Canadian history.

To ensure a balanced and non-partisan approach to this review, the CHA has urged the House Committee to include meaningful consultations with the major professional associations representing the historical disciplines, including the CHA, the Canadian Anthropological Society, and the Canadian Archaeological Association. Absent such meaningful cross-disciplinary involvement and inputs, the Committee's work will be greatly impaired and it will lack credibility with the historical community and the general public. Notwithstanding the trends towards the politicization of other aspects of Canadian culture, we must resolve at least to protect history from political interference.