

Harper and Non-History

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THE HARPER GOVERNMENT, as the current regime likes to describe itself, claims to be interested in the promotion of Canadian history. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Harper government is not about history, and the recent debates about Canadian history and its various representations are not an extension of the once much-heralded “History Wars.” Frankly, the Canadian variant of that international battle, best captured in Jack Granatstein’s jeremiad for a lost, mythical world of manly men in politics and war, ended in an easy victory for social and cultural history. No professional historian, including political and military specialists, could take the distorted critique in *Who Killed Canadian History* as anything but a failed murder mystery. Although Tory ideologue Jason Kenney described it as “brilliant” and its author as “eminent,” the 21st century international consensus is that history is about far more than great men, battles, wars, nations, and imperial triumphs. Moreover, history is messy and complicated, not neat and simple. History is a contested terrain, not a solemn celebration of the past.

So if the Harper government is not about history then what are they on about? The simple answer is that they are creating a celebratory myth of a Canadian past that never existed. The propaganda machine is being cranked up to provide a high Tory version of the past which approximates Leo Strauss’ “noble lie” or Orwell’s “big lie.” Or as Iain Sinclair so nicely put it in another related context: “That was the Thatcher method: the shameless lie, endlessly repeated, with furious intensity – as if passion meant truth.” The Harperites want to impose via celebration a simple, unified, patriotic story of Canada’s past and then pretend it merits the name history.

The debacle of the recent “immigrants’ guide” version of Canadian history (*Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*, 2009), the painful cuts to the major institutions of Canadian history such as Parks Canada and Library and Archives Canada, and the shifting plans for the new Museum of Canadian History – all make only too clear the propaganda aims of Harper non-history. While cutting monies to promote the serious study of Canadian history, the Tories spend larger sums on the celebration of the War of 1812. Meanwhile, the Tory-dominated House of Commons Heritage Committee identifies the following as key issues in Canadian history: Confederation, World War I (especially the Battle of Vimy Ridge), World War II (especially the Liberation of Holland and the Battle of Ortona), the Korean War, and the Afghan “conflict.” And the new (15 July 2013) “Research Strategy” of the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Canadian War Museum identifies the following three themes for the next ten years’ work: A. “Meaning and Memory” (150th Anniversary of Confederation, 100th anniversary of World

War I and the 75th anniversary of World War II); B. more commendably, “First Peoples”; and, C. “Compromise and Conflict,” which is translated as power and politics, population movements and settlements, Canada and the World, and Cultural Expression. A selection of examples for Theme A includes 1867, World War I and II, and the Korean War. For Theme B we find Arctic exploration, national security in the north, and First Peoples in Canadian military history. Included in Theme C are Confederation (again), Multilateral Security, Leadership, Ancient Greece (?!), International Treaties, World War I (again), and Canada in the Former Yugoslavia. Granted these are only examples and I have not included them all, but I think the Tory flavours of the month are readily apparent.

As Amanda Watson recently argued, the Harperites aim to “promote a master narrative in the hopes of recasting a unified Canadian citizen.” Or, as Jason Kenney has put it, “unless we do a better job of teaching history and common values, we risk social unrest in the future.” Harper himself has opined that “you cannot build a unified country by burying and rewriting its history.” And commenting on the new Citizenship Guide, he praised its “deeper understanding of Canada’s history, symbols and values” before noting that its predecessor from 1994 “didn’t even mention Remembrance Day.” Perhaps Harper’s most profound historical comment, however, was his celebratory claim that Canadians “have no history of colonialism.” The Harper quest for, in Kenney’s words, a “common understanding of our country,” or, in my terms, mythology – a national narrative of a triumphant, romanticized “warrior state” – epitomizes the Straussian “noble lie” or the Orwellian “big lie.” Propagandistic celebration is the centrepiece of Harper’s non-history project.