

The Canadian Heritage Committee Kerfuffle: A History Educator's Take

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The latest round in Canada's History Wars was set off by reports on May 2, 2013 that the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage was going to “undertake a thorough and comprehensive review of significant aspects in Canadian history.” As details of the Heritage Committee’s review emerged, controversy erupted as politicians, historians, political scientists and members of the chattering classes rushed to either defend or oppose the committee's proposed mandate through public statements, articles, news reports, and editorials. The controversy centred on three main issues: why the committee is reviewing federal, provincial and municipal programs designed to preserve Canadian history and heritage when they have already made key decisions in this area, whether the heritage committee’s review of Canadian history was infringing on provincial rights, and whether the Conservative government was trying to rebrand history to suit their vision of Canada.

While all of these controversial issues focus on important discussions that Canadians need to have, the overblown partisan rhetoric that fuelled the debates served as a red herring that distracted the public from having a thoughtful discussion about what Canadian history educators have been focusing on for years—why Canadians should learn history, and the methods and practices that best enhance Canadians’ understanding of their past. In other words, the importance of “how” Canadians best learn, access, preserve and engage with their history was pushed to the sidelines.

Before describing the controversy, it is important to understand what all the fuss was about in the first place. The Conservative dominated committee (seven Conservative MP's, four NDP MP's and one Liberal MP) met behind closed doors on April 29 and agreed to give themselves what historian [Christopher Dummit charitably described](#) as “an eccentric mandate.” ([Click here](#) to see the Minutes of the Proceedings for April 29). Like the recent Conservative omnibus bills that were swept through Parliament, the Heritage Committee’s diverse mandate includes many aspects that are commendable, but includes other aspects that justifiably raised the ire of different groups across Canada.

The Committee’s review of the significant aspects in Canadian history will focus on three specific subjects and themes, all three of which proved to be enormously controversial in the public debate that ensued:

1. To compare the standards and courses of study offered in primary and post-secondary institutions in each of the provinces and territories;
2. To review federal, provincial and municipal programs designed to preserve our history and heritage;
3. To focus on Canadian history including but not limited to pre-Confederation, early Confederation, suffrage, World War I, with an emphasis on battles such as Vimy Ridge, World War II including the Liberation of Holland, the Battle of Ortona, Battle of the Atlantic, the Korean conflict, peacekeeping missions, constitutional development, the Afghanistan conflict, early 20th century Canada, post-war Canada, and the late 20th century.

The other aspects of the committee's proposed investigation evaded controversy. The Committee's review also seeks to emphasize how Canadians utilize the tools and methods available for accessing and preserving historical content and education, how Canadians increase their knowledge of history, and in what can only be described as a bizarre and random addition, how Hansard can be used as a means of preserving important witness testimony.

The methods that the Heritage Committee will utilize to gather information for their review are also relatively straightforward and uncontroversial. The Heritage Committee plans to "interview witnesses and gather firsthand accounts of significant periods in history, visit national museums, and meet with public and private broadcasters to determine their role in preserving important accounts of Canadian history." What remains to be seen is how the Heritage Committee plans to interview witnesses and gather firsthand accounts for the events on their list that occurred more than a hundred years ago?

Lastly, the final report is expected to "highlight best practices, new methods and potential opportunities to preserve, protect and enhance Canadians' knowledge of our history while recommending ways of improving access to our historical collections." Who could argue with a report that intends to improve Canadians' knowledge of history while also improving the preservation of history and Canadians' access to history?

Preserving Canadian Heritage and History

The Heritage Committee's decision to review federal, provincial and municipal programs designed to preserve Canadian history and heritage struck many commentators as being ironic, if not hypocritical. Why is the federal government interested in reviewing how Canadians preserve and access Canadian history and heritage when they have already made key policy decisions that have limited the preservation of Canadian history and heritage and the access that Canadians will have to their history?

In two recent articles [Thomas Peace](#) and [Sean Kheraj](#) described how the Conservatives have made significant cuts to federal programs and institutions that have significantly decreased Canadians' access to important heritage institutions. They cancelled the \$1.7 million National Archival Development Program that helped support local archives, despite the fact that a 2010 audit of the program deemed it "adequate and efficient."

Additionally they cut \$9.6 million from Library and Archives Canada (LAC), and \$29 million from Parks Canada. As a result Library and Archives Canada terminated twenty-one archivist and archival assistant positions, a fifty per cent reduction in digitization and circulation staff and the elimination of the interlibrary loans program. When considered collectively, the cuts to LAC will greatly reduce public access to archival materials, and the ability of LAC to preserve the past via the acquisition of new records or the digitization of current materials.

In the 2012 budget, the federal government also reduced funding for Parks Canada by \$29 million annually. Parks Canada is responsible for managing Canada's national parks and park reserves, as well as 167 national historic sites. The \$29 million reduction in federal funding will result in an estimated 638 job losses including a skeletal staff of just twelve archaeologists and eight conservators, which will severely limit the ability of Parks Canada to conduct historical research and preservation. The budget cuts also forced Parks Canada to cancel its Education Outreach Program which connected park programming to school curricula.

While it is difficult to condemn the Heritage Committee's decision to review federal, provincial and municipal programs designed to preserve Canadian history and heritage, the decision comes at a curious time considering that Conservative government budget cuts have significantly decreased Canadians' access to important heritage institutions. If the Conservative government is so concerned about Canadians access to their past, it would have made much more sense if the Heritage Committee conducted their review of Canadian heritage and history before the government made the decision to cut funding to various Canadian history and heritage institutions.

Provincial Rights

When reports of the Heritage Committee's mandate emerged on May 2, opposition to the Committee's decision to compare "the standards and courses of study offered in primary and post-secondary institutions in each of the provinces and territories" followed soon thereafter. Government opposition and critics overreacted and used highly charged rhetoric to charge the Commons committee with overstepping their constitutional powers. A [CBC news story](#) reported that NDP MP Raymond Côté stated the following in the House of Commons: "That [the Heritage Committee mandate] has nothing to do with promoting Canadian history. That is interference, pure and simple. The former Reformers now want to control everything. What is the world coming to?" Critics claimed that education is a provincial responsibility, and the federal government had no business sticking their noses into issues that are not their concern. NDP deputy leader Libby Davies asked the House during question period, "Why are Conservative MPs now intent on telling provincial schools what they should teach?"

In an article in *Maclean's*, [Paul Wells described](#) how various ministers in Pauline Marois' Quebec government declared they would never tolerate such an intrusion into their provincial rights. Some critics went so far as to imagine a clandestine Conservative plot to change the way that history is taught in the provinces' schools. In an [iPolitics article](#), B.C. Social Studies Teacher's Association President Dale Martelli argued that the federal government was trying to implement a curriculum that would focus on trivial facts and figures rather than requiring students to think through the material.

Whether the criticism was valid or not, the Heritage Committee had underestimated the intensity of the opposition to the committee's decision to review history curricula in each province and territory. When the committee reconvened on May 6, NDP MP Pierre Nantel moved that the committee "immediately halt its study on Canadian history considering the interference with provincial jurisdiction on education." While Nantel's motion to halt the study was defeated 7 votes to 4, the committee decided to backtrack and later voted unanimously to delete the language in the motion that referred to the study and comparison of the standards and courses of study offered in primary and post-secondary institutions in each of the provinces and territories across Canada.

In his [May 6 column](#), Andrew Coyne was one of the few commentators to support the Heritage Committee's right to inquire into provincial education policies, and for the first time in recent memory I wholeheartedly agree with him. Interestingly, Coyne wrote his article on the very day that the Heritage Committee decided to retreat from comparing the standards and courses of study. At the beginning of his column he included the following note: *I had written this column in defence of the Commons Heritage committee's right to inquire into provincial*

education policies, shortly before the committee, taking heat from the opposition and no doubt under instructions from the PMO, withdrew the proposal. I stand by the idea, even if they don't.

Coyne rightly reminds those who oppose the Heritage Committee's review not to get too "out of hand" in their criticism because at the end of the day, Parliament doesn't have the power to legislate provincial curricula, nor is the committee planning on telling provincial schools what to teach. The Minutes of the Proceedings clearly state that the committee was merely planning "to breakdown and compare" relevant standards and courses of study offered in order to determine what is taught in the provinces' and territories' schools. Surely the Heritage Committee is fully justified in informing themselves on how Canadian history is being taught in schools across Canada. Isn't it logical that the Heritage Committee knows which topics and events are being studied in provinces and territories across Canada? This information could be used to help Canadian Heritage decide which initiatives and programs they should fund in order to preserve, protect and enhance Canadians' knowledge of our history and access to our historical collections.

Whose History Is Right?

But the controversy did not abate when the Heritage Committee agreed to abandon the comparison of history standards and courses of study at provincial and territorial schools. Instead, the flames of controversy were fanned by partisan politicians focused on the specific topics and events in Canadian history that were the focus of the committee. The debate about *what* topics in Canadian history should be focused on descended into a partisan contest of *whose version* of history is correct. Unfortunately this debate focused too much on the *what* of history and too little on *how* Canadians can best enhance their understandings of the past.

Critics accused the Conservative government of using the review of a select list of significant topics in Canadian history to politicize, revise and make history in their own image. In [Mike De Souza's May 2 article](#) NDP deputy heritage critic Andrew Chase stated that "They're obsessed with reframing history and rebranding it in the image of the Conservative party." Critics claim that the list of historical topics and events to be reviewed by the committee focus almost exclusively on military battles, loyalty to the crown and past Conservative achievements such as the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. In his poignant assessment of the controversy, Canadian historian [Christopher Dummit](#) argued that the Tory version of history is similar to the triumphalist and traditional history espoused by Jack Granatstein in his polemic book *Who Killed Canadian History?* Granatstein claimed that Canadians need to celebrate a history that we can be proud of, not dwell on victimization or injustices of the past. The brand of celebratory history Granatstein supports sounds remarkably similar to the statement made by Conservative Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq on behalf of the federal government: "We have been very clear about wanting Canadians to reconnect with their proud history and heritage." While I fully support the Conservative government's highlighting of proud Canadian moments in the past, I wonder what they suggest Canadians do about those not so proud moments. In some cases, one person's or group's "proud moment" is another person's or group's devastating moment. Perspective is everything. In other words, how do we define what, in the past, we deserve to be proud of?

Furthermore, government critics contend that the Heritage Committee is just another example of how the Conservatives are reorienting the nation's identity to suit their vision. They point to the Citizenship Guide brouhaha of several years ago where the Conservative government

rewrote the [Canadian Citizenship Guide](#) to focus on military history and a celebration of the crown, while replacing or ignoring many Liberal achievements. (For a summary of the initial reactions to the Citizenship Guide click [here](#), for a variety of viewpoints on the controversy click [here](#), and for information about “The People's Citizenship Guide: A Response to Conservative Canada” click [here](#)). Other examples include the renaming of the Museum of Civilization into the Canadian Museum of History (or is that the Museum of Canadian History?), the \$30 million spent commemorating the War of 1812, the decision to put the Vimy Ridge memorial on the new \$20 bill, and celebrating John Diefenbaker's Bill of Rights while ignoring the 30th anniversary of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 2012.

On the other side of the partisan divide (as captured by this [Globe and Mail editorial](#) amongst others) supporters of the Heritage Committee review (some but not all are members of the Conservative party) argue that Canada's political and military past has been ignored over the past few decades of Liberal control when everyone was fed a steady diet of Liberal achievements including peacekeeping, Medicare, the Canada Pension Plan and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In the Conservative view, the winners write the history and while the Liberals used to be the winners, the Conservatives are in charge now and they believe that this gives them the right to restore some balance to Canadians' view of the past. Defenders of the Heritage Committee mandate also contend that history is subjective since historical narratives are constantly being rewritten and reinterpreted, so it is important that the Heritage Committee investigate changes in the way that the past is interpreted.

Supporters of the Conservative government also argue that the Heritage Committee has a genuine and legitimate interest in how Canada is portrayed to Canadians and should be commended for starting this conversation about Canadian history. Anthony Wilson Smith of the Historica-Dominion Institute wondered if it is inappropriate for federal members of parliament to discuss history, then who is entitled to talk about it? As [Emmett Macfarlane](#) and Christopher Dummitt point out in their respective articles, who can argue with an increased interest in Canadian history?

[Paul Wells](#) explains that history provokes tension because it cannot be divorced from a set of ideas about how society should be organized. The opposition doesn't want the Conservatives to teach history because they like to tell tales of martial success and the genius of John A. Macdonald. The Conservatives don't want the Liberals to teach history because they will focus too much on Trudeau, and they don't want the NDP to teach history because they won't be able to stop talking about Tommy Douglas. Finally no one wants the Bloc Quebecois to teach history because they will focus on how everything went to pot in 1759. So what's the solution to the partisan bickering over history?

Macfarlane and Dummitt arrive at the same solution. Public debate. Rather than having a Heritage Committee conduct a limited investigation of Canadian history as is currently being done, Dummitt suggests that the committee organize an in-depth inquiry that would focus on a wide range of historical topics and speak to many more people than they have currently planned to do. Similarly, Macfarlane believes that a public debate about Canadian history is well worth having because it will provide the opportunity for the Conservative government to explain their approach to, and vision of Canadian history, and because a debate about Canadian history is the best way to improve knowledge of it.

The Missing Part of the Debate

Throughout the controversy about the Heritage Committee's review of Canadian history we have heard from historians, politicians, political scientists and journalists who have all focused on the "what" of history, the topics and events in Canadian history that they think Canadians should learn about. What has been largely missing in this debate are the voices of history teachers and history educators who focus on the "why" and "how" of history. The "why" focuses on the purposes for learning Canadian history, and the "how" focuses on the methods and practices that help Canadians learn history in meaningful ways.

[Adam Chapnick](#) was one of the few who paid any attention to teaching and learning in his article about the controversy, and although I agree with several of his points, he gets it wrong in a couple of key places. He correctly pointed out that the biggest problem with the Heritage Committee review is that their witness list does not include anyone with a research background in teaching and learning at the secondary and post-secondary levels, or in cognitive science more generally. Chapnick rightly concludes that historical content will never mean much if it doesn't engage Canadians at the individual level, either within the academic setting or outside of it.

Later in the article, Chapnick argues that if the Heritage Committee is genuinely interested in promoting greater understanding of Canada's past, they should speak to the cognitive scientists first and worry about the actual history content later. This is to say that how one learns is more important than what is learned, a claim that is dubious at best. How one learns is important, but the how is also shaped by the what. To have content without method, or method without content seems unthinkable. It is important that the Heritage Committee investigate both the best methods for teaching and learning about Canadian history while also conducting a vigorous, wide-ranging review of the events and topics that are significant to Canadians.

What Chapnick also fails to recognize is that while cognitive scientists might be able to offer the Heritage Committee some general advice on how people learn, there is a community of scholars in Canada who specialize in history education— why students learn history, what history students learn, and how students learn history, and these scholars are right under their noses working in Canadian universities, many receiving funding from federal government programs. This group of scholars, influenced by British history education research in the 1970s and the cognitive science revolution of the 1980s, contributed to the development of an international field of history education research that exploded in the 1990s. Since this time, the number of Canadian scholars interested in history education has grown into a network that includes other constituencies interested in history education such as academic historians, public historians in museums, archives and historic sites, practicing teachers, and curriculum policy makers.

This network has been strengthened by the creation of two organizations funded in part by federal programs: [The History Education Network/Histoire et éducation en réseau \(THEN/HiER\)](#) and [The Historical Thinking Project \(HTP\)](#) that can provide the Heritage Committee with ideas about which practices and methods that could enhance Canadians' knowledge of history. These ideas and recommendations could help meet one of the key expectations of their mandate: to "highlight best practices, new methods and potential opportunities to preserve, protect and enhance Canadians' knowledge of our history..."

The History Education Network/Histoire et éducation en réseau (THEN/HiER) was formed in 2005 to promote and improve history teaching and learning by bringing together varied constituencies involved in history education "to create more research-informed practice

(from kindergarten to graduate school) and more practice-informed research through dialogue among these various communities.” Dr. Peter Seixas, a Professor and Canada Research Chair at the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness (CSHC) in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, created the [Historical Thinking Project](#) (HTP) in 2006 as a non-profit educational initiative funded in part by the Department of Canadian Heritage (Canadian Studies Program) and THEN/HiER.

The HTP has developed a new approach to how teachers teach and students learn history by focusing on recent international research on history learning and teaching. Two questions that the Heritage Committee did not consider are asked on the Historical Thinking Project website: What should students know after 12 years of studying history in school? What should they be able to do with their knowledge? The idea that the only purpose for learning history is to memorize facts and details about one story of the past doesn’t seem adequate any longer. Do we want to teach our students that there is only one correct view of history that they should know and blindly accept, or do we want our students to have the intellectual tools to interpret and analyze different accounts of Canadian history, including the Conservative and Liberal versions?

The HTP is based on the idea that historical thinking is central to learning history in the same way that scientific thinking is central to learning science. History students spend the majority of their time studying other people’s historical conclusions, not constructing their own understanding. The goal of the HTP is that students develop competencies as historical thinkers as they move through their years as history students. The project has developed a framework of [six historical thinking concepts](#) that provide the basis of historical thinking:

1. Establish *historical significance*
2. Use *primary source evidence*
3. Identify *continuity and change*
4. Analyze *cause and consequence*
5. Take *historical perspectives*, and
6. Understand the *ethical dimension* of historical interpretations.

The HTP also works closely with teachers, social studies and history departments, local school boards, provincial ministries of education, publishers, and public history agencies and institutions from each province across Canada to embed historical thinking in all aspects of teaching, assessment, and learning.

It has been over 45 years since the last comprehensive report on history teaching in Canada, A.B. Hodgetts' 1968 report *What Culture? What Heritage? A Study of Civic Education in Canada*. After witnessing students learn Canadian history in classrooms across the nation, Hodgetts concluded that,

we are teaching a dry-as dust chronological story of uninterrupted political and economic progress told without the controversy that is an inherent part of history. The great debates that could bring our history to life, the natural conflicts of opinion, the new interpretations of the past by successive generations of historians....are all grayed out of existence. (p. 24)

As long as our politicians continue to focus their Canadian history debates on whose story is correct they are missing one of the important points that Hodgetts and the rest of the

history education community figured out a long time ago: that learning history in school is not just about learning about “the” story of the past and all of its requisite facts and details; it is about helping students (and citizens) develop the tools and knowledge to participate in public debates about Canadian history rationally and knowledgeably. Rather than argue about which story students should learn, let’s argue about why we teach Canadian history and how we can best teach Canadian history to our students so that they can construct a more sophisticated understanding of our past than the politicians can. Furthermore, if the Committee on Canadian Heritage is really committed to investigating how Canadians engage with their past, they should also consider funding a 2013 version of Hodgett’s national study. This research study could be conducted by Canadian research scholars in history education to determine what and how students learn history across Canada. Only a federal department like Canadian Heritage has the resources to be able to commission and fund a study of this magnitude and importance.

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