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For Tories, rewriting history is just one of the perks of power

By John Ibbitson

Harper government is determined to reinterpret Canada's history, myths and symbols to make them more Tory-friendly

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The House of Commons Heritage Committee heard from witnesses Monday on one of the stranger projects to occupy its time in recent years: studying how Canadians learn their history.

If your reflex reaction was: "But isn't education a provincial jurisdiction?" then that makes two of us. One suspects that – shocking! – a political motive lies behind the new study.

The Harper government is determined to reinterpret Canada's history, myths and symbols to make them more Tory-friendly. Committing history, to turn a phrase, is just the latest effort.

The committee, which is dominated by Conservative MPs, voted recently to "undertake a thorough and comprehensive review of significant aspects in Canadian history." Initially, the review was to include a comparative analysis of history courses offered in each province and territory. But howls from the opposition that the committee was invading provincial space convinced the Conservatives Monday to drop that reference. Now the committee will concentrate on how government institutions and programs preserve and promote Canada's past, with "a 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."

On Monday, the committee heard from organizers of Project Husky 2013, which seeks to commemorate the until-now untold story of the Canadian contribution to the Sicily campaign, and of progress in rebranding the Museum of Civilization as the Canadian Museum of History.

The survey "is a great idea," says Anthony Wilson Smith, who heads the Historica-Dominion Institute, which promotes a greater understanding of Canadian history.

"Are we really going to say that it is inappropriate to discuss history among elected members of the federal parliament?" he asked. "If not them, who's entitled to talk about it?"

This is perfectly true. It is also true that the Conservatives have long chafed at contemporary depictions of Canadian history, which they see as subtle propaganda for the Liberal Party.

Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson chose a flag for Canada that conveniently featured Liberal red and omitted Tory blue. The celebration of peacekeeping and federal programs such as health care and the Canada Pension Plan were all Liberal achievements. And the Constitution is indelibly linked to Pierre Trudeau, father of you-know-who.

The Conservatives have responded by attempting to reorient the national identity toward its martial past and toward Conservative achievements. They put the memorial at Vimy Ridge on the \$20 bill, lavished money and attention on the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812 and promoted John Diefenbaker's Bill of Rights, among other things.

It would surprise few of us if the committee concludes that (a) Canadians don't know enough about their history (b) what they have learned places great emphasis on the evolution of women's rights, the treatment of aboriginal peoples, prejudice and racism toward immigrant communities, the despoliation of the environment from colonial to modern times and the like, at the expense of knowing where the Scheldt is and what happened there.

"They are very serious about rebranding Canadian history in the image of the Conservative Party," said NDP MP Andrew Cash. The official opposition – which objects to the military emphasis, to the intrusion into provincial jurisdiction and to the absence of any mention of First Nations or Quebec in the terms of reference – tried but failed to get the survey deep-sixed at Monday's committee hearing.

But even if the committee does end up offering a more militant, patriotic and overtly conservative alternative history for the nation's consideration, who would not welcome an open debate over how Canadians should see their country's past?

So long as federal funding for education is never tied to provincial adoption of a federally-dictated curriculum, there can be no harm in hearing how the Conservatives would teach history if they were in front of the classroom.

History is, after all, written by the victors. Rewriting the history books is simply one of the perks of power.

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References

1. theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/globe-politics-insider

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