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[See table of contents](#)

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Rethinking the Impact of the Harper Government on Canadian History: It's Our Fault Too

Adam Chapnick

IT IS EASY FOR HISTORIANS, and particularly for academics, to criticize the Harper government's attitude towards Canadian history. As is clear from this collection of papers, between (among other things) cuts to Parks Canada, to national museums, and to Library and Archives Canada, evidence of Ottawa's disregard for much of what professionals find critical to the future of the discipline of history abounds.

If one is to be fair, however, while our public history colleagues – who have dedicated their careers to making our subject accessible to a popular audience – have every right to condemn Ottawa aggressively, those of us who work in the post-secondary education system as academics should be more prudent. Setting aside our obvious disappointment, and considering the state of the study of Canadian history objectively, it becomes clear that if there are problems, we too are to blame.

It is worth recalling, for example, that the great majority of Canadian voters – including Conservatives and their supporters – once studied history in a Canadian high school. And the curriculum for their high school courses either was or could (and indeed should) have been shaped by the contributions of Canadian academics. Furthermore, tens, if not hundreds of thousands of Canadians – again including Conservatives and their supporters – took *our* Canadian history courses in universities. Putting it simply, then, if we don't like how some of our own graduates understand our discipline, perhaps we need to rethink what and how it is we're teaching them.

I see two possible reasons for what might be a collective failure of Canadian historians to communicate effectively in the classroom. First, in spite of the way that we value evidence in our scholarly research, as a professional community, we seem to all but ignore its importance when it comes to approaches to promoting student learning. How many tenured academic historians read the cognitive science literature, for example? How many participate actively in the scholarship of teaching and learning, be it by attending conferences, publishing articles, or even just contributing to discussion boards or subscribing to list-serves? At the community level, how many articles on teaching history have been published in the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* over the last decade? What percentage of articles in the *CHA Bulletin* deal with teaching-related activities?

These questions are not meant to suggest that Canadian historians are necessarily poor, or even ineffective, educators. They do imply, however, that given how much of our time is spent in the classroom allegedly promoting student learning, most of us do not know nearly enough about the functioning

of the human brain. And it is hardly unreasonable to suggest that a greater immersion in evidence-based research on teaching and learning would enhance our students' academic experiences. Perhaps if they learned more in our classrooms (and by learning, I am referring to an experience that causes a *permanent* change in knowledge, understanding, or attitude), fewer would emerge with attitudes towards Canadian history that make so many in the profession uncomfortable today, and perhaps more would support our calls to better fund those institutions that make it possible for us to do what we do.

My second, albeit inter-related, explanation for our collective failure is an academic reward system that has encouraged us to privilege (at least in our scholarship) a small, élitist audience to the exclusion of the Canadian public as a whole. Let us be honest: one receives tenure for publishing an academic monograph with a university press, not for producing a high school textbook. A single scholarly article in a reputable journal with a subscription list of under 1000 advances one's academic career more than one hundred op-eds in national or even international newspapers and magazines with readerships in the tens of thousands. And most university tenure and promotion committees would consider a multi-year commitment to collaborate with a provincial government to modernize its Canadian history curriculum to be service, not scholarship.

By deliberately rewarding such exclusiveness in personnel decisions, and by ascribing so little relative weight to the promotion of student learning in university and high school classrooms, we have all but forced the responsibility for the promotion of historical thinking among a more general audience to be taken up by private organizations, by the media and now, it seems, by the federal government. And given our dismissive attitude towards popularizing the past, it is hardly surprising that Prime Minister Harper's team in Ottawa has rarely looked to us for advice on how to promote historical initiatives that it believes to be important. Similarly, it should not be shocking that protests of the Harper government's approach to history have inspired strong support among those who dislike the regime inherently, but relatively little among others. Indeed, the ease with which the Conservatives have transformed the historical landscape in Canada should be a wake-up call to Canadian academics: it's time to reconsider the way that we as professional historians do business.

To me, any substantive innovation will require courage and leadership from the most senior and established historians, for only they have the power, authority, and influence necessary to effect real change within the academic system. We must begin with a systematized commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning. That means offering an undergraduate course in every history department across the country that combines the study of how people learn with the study of how historians approach their craft. Such a course should be taught by the department's most senior scholars, who should be, ideally, not just prolific publishers but also exemplary, scholarly teachers.

Creating such a course will require many of us to go back to school, and it will mean extensive collaboration with experts in teaching and learning from other academic departments and from across our universities. But it will be worth it if it leads to more students graduating with a greater commitment to the study of history (as we understand it).

At the more senior levels, no PhD candidate in history should be able to complete her or his program without having participated successfully in a graduate-level course in the teaching of history, again developed and facilitated by a combination of our faculty and members of the departments of psychology and/or education. Such courses must be required, not optional, and they must be offered by the history department itself, not outsourced to a generalist teaching and learning centre.

Leadership will also have to be shown in hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions. Working collaboratively with faculty unions and other relevant groups, we must re-assess the standard metrics of professional achievement to better recognize both the value and the importance of contributing to curriculum design in the secondary school system and making history accessible to a broad, popular audience. We must begin to judge our professional success by the impact we have made on our students as citizens, rather than just by the number of books we've published or peer-reviewed articles we've produced.

This is not to say, of course, that we should stop doing traditional, scholarly research. Rather, it is to suggest that we must add new criteria to the way that we evaluate the quality of that research to better reflect how it effects or does not effect change at the broader national level.

In this call for substantive change, I do not mean to imply that there are not already countless historians doing many of these things, and doing them well. The problem, however, is that too many of them are untenured, and as a result deprived of the capacity to institutionalize their more progressive approach to historical scholarship. Moreover, given the sad state of permanent academic employment opportunities across the country, it would be foolish to assume that the changes advocated here will simply emerge over time. A real transformation will require leadership from our elder statespeople.

In summary, there are undoubtedly problems with the Harper government's approach to history. But it is time to accept that over the last number of decades, we academics have contributed significantly to the environment that has empowered, and indeed enabled Ottawa to make the changes that it has. We cannot blame the Conservatives exclusively for a problem that we have been complicit in creating.