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Harper's History: Does the Right Hand Know What the Other Right Hand is Doing?

Reg Whitaker

When "history" is employed by politicians, pressure groups, or the state, it is not, of course, the history that historians or social scientists employ, but rather a usable partisan narrative. It is waste of time subjecting such a narrative to the scholarly criteria normally applied to historical interpretation. In fact, partisan "historical" narratives are not really directed at the past at all, but at the present and the immediate future.

When we look at how Stephen Harper (and his highly centralized and tightly controlled government) uses "history" this must be understood primarily in light of his partisan project as a conservative innovator who has united the Right and established Conservative party majority rule in a Canada that was previously dominated by the Liberal party and its liberal political values. Mr. Harper defines his idea of Canadian history and his own place in that history against the frame of the long Liberal century that, as with the memory of Pierre Trudeau, "haunts us still."

Like the Nixon Republicans arriving as an army of occupation in Democratic Washington in 1969, the Harper Conservatives, with roots in Reform and what were once the ideological and regional fringes of Liberal Canada, view themselves psychologically as Ottawa outsiders with a mission to control the "liberal" bureaucracy; rein in the "liberal" courts; bypass the "liberal" media; marginalize "liberal" scientists and social scientists; and in the long run transform the liberal values of Canadian society into conservative values. To achieve these ambitious aims, Conservatives must confront and destroy the Liberal narrative of Canadian history that has remained largely unchallenged for so many decades.

What are some of the leading elements of Liberal history that Mr. Harper is reacting against? While this is far from an exhaustive list, I would for the purposes of this essay particularly point to the following components of the Liberal narrative:

- Canada's transformation from colony to nation under Liberal guidance
- Liberal internationalism in foreign policy with peacekeeping at the centre
- Bilingual national unity
- Multiculturalism and the liberal advance of equality rights

Some have pointed out that elements of this Liberal narrative are caricatures (e.g., a "nation of peacekeepers" replacing Canada's lengthy military record in foreign wars). Thus Tory revisionism might be seen as a necessary corrective. There is undoubted validity in this critique of Liberal ideological

distortions of the actual historical record. But all partisan history is just that. The Tory replacement narrative is just as disconnected from actual historical reality (e.g., War of 1812 nationalist mythology that departs from sober historical analysis).

The real point is this: what does Harper's history tell us about the Harper political project? What is the political narrative encoded in the various historical revisionist forays of the Harper government? What I discern is a lack of consistent narrative meaning, bordering at times on outright ideological incoherence.

Take the much-publicized emphasis on "Britishness" as a distinctive feature of Canada's historical legacy. This is a rebranding exercise aimed squarely at the old Liberal "colony to nation" story line. It has taken several highly visible forms: the replacement of paintings by Canadian artists with portraits of Her Britannic Majesty in embassies and consulates; bringing back "Royal" into the names of the Canadian forces; piggy-backing on the media events of the royal wedding and the royal birth. Backing these symbolic affirmations of the Crown is the proffering of a counter-historical narrative to Liberal/Whig history that stresses the enduring quality of Canada's ties to the Mother Country and to the Commonwealth, along with a certain distancing from our republican neighbour to the south. This latter was the subtext of the Tory-sponsored War of 1812 celebration of a "Canadian" loyalist victory over American aggression.

Tory revisionism may simply be a case of "not-Liberal" story telling. But it can conceal some very particular partisan motives. Historically, the main opposition to the "Canada as a British nation" thesis came from Québec. The Liberal vision of a national unity bargain based on bilingual partnership was closely linked to the colony to nation narrative in which symbols of British hegemony – with unpleasant connotations of French Canadian subordination – were seen as falling away to be replaced by symbols of a distinctive Canadian national autonomy that could accommodate both Francophone and Anglophone Canadians. Lester Pearson's replacement of the Red Ensign with the Canadian flag or Pierre Trudeau's patriation of the British North America Act were the high points of this Liberal story. Embarrassingly, Québec was indifferent to the Maple Leaf, and was loudly offside for patriation, but that just shows that partisan narratives do not always match their own advertising.

Why the Harper Tories should embrace an Anglophile royalist narrative is not intuitively obvious. Monarchical enthusiasm is in long term decline in Canada and what was once a pro-British voting constituency of some resonance *circa* 1940 is now virtually extinct. It might however serve a more negative short-term purpose. Exploiting NDP (and potentially Trudeau Liberal) command over Québec in the rest of Canada, the Harperites raise the spectre of the "socialist-separatist coalition" as resurrected from the prorogation crisis of 2008–09. By flaunting the old symbols of British hegemony, they hoped to draw out "disloyal" separatist sentiments from an NDP Québec caucus that unsurprisingly contains a number of Québec nationalists. The

Parti Québécois government in Québec has obligingly played its part in this Punch and Judy show by engaging in such exercises as removing the Canadian flag from the National Assembly, hoping to rouse protests from the rest of Canada that would in turn mobilize their base.

To see how the Tories (and right-wing media) seek to exploit "history" to sow division we might briefly examine the manufactured controversy over old remarks about World War I by NDP MP Alexandre Boulerice. On a left-wing blog in 2007 – four years before his election – Boulerice had criticized the Harper government›s celebration of the Battle of Vimy Ridge by questioning why "thousands of poor wretches were slaughtered to take possession of a hill" in an imperialist war. Resurrected from obscurity by the PMO, Boulerice's words were condemned in 2013 as evidence of disloyalty and disrespect for Canada's military martyrs – the perfect symbol of the "socialist-separatist coalition," not to speak of Québec's doubtful allegiance to the country. Boulerice as target usefully combined the British and the military narratives of Tory "history." The fact that questioning the slaughter in the trenches would scarcely raise an eyebrow among academic historians was beside the political point.

Ironically, these exercises in divisiveness have come to little, if for no better (or perhaps worse) reason than the general indifference with which both the Francophone Québec and Canadian publics now view the hostile tribal goads that once roused passions on both sides. But what I find more interesting is that Harper's largely futile attempt to reignite English-French divisions to his political benefit was pre-dated by the very opposite strategy. After Harper came into office in 2006, riding what appeared to be a rising tide in Québec, he was apparently willing to risk alienating his populist western base by assiduous cultivation of Québec nationalist support, going so far as to pass a resolution in Parliament recognizing the Québécois as a nation within Canada. Chantal Hébert published a book nicely titled *French Kiss: Stephen Harper's Blind Date with Quebec*. It was only when this blind date went very wrong that the Conservatives began seriously pushing the Anglophile royalist version of Canadian history. But this was a fallback position. If Québec had responded to his overtures, it is a safe bet that the pro-British historical narrative would never have come to full fruition, and the Conservatives would have simply imitated the old Liberal base in Québec.

The British theme is cognitively dissonant with a central, and electorally crucial, drive of the Harper government: drawing into the Tory camp a wide range of ethnic communities. The visible minority communities energetically and so far relatively successfully courted by Jason Kenney are unlikely to find in Harper's loyalist narrative much that speaks to them, and much in the actual historical record that speaks of their marginalization, subordination, and humiliation. Hence the Liberal narrative of a multicultural equality-seeking Canada makes veiled reappearances, subverting the British theme.

The need to repudiate every element of former Liberal hegemony at the same time as the Conservatives chase the same electoral constituencies as the

Liberals of the past leads to an incoherent picture of history. Perhaps it reflects incoherence in the Conservative political project itself, as a few uneasy conservative commentators have begun suggesting.

Can the Tories remain outsiders with the long term mission of implanting conservative values on a resistant centrist country, while also assuming the identity of a pan-Canadian "natural" governing coalition that looks suspiciously like the profile of the old Liberal regime?