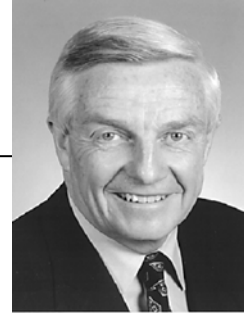


Take Proud Aim on History



The best way to arm tomorrow's citizenry, says former Alberta premier The Honourable Peter Lougheed, is with the desire and skills to understand their Canadian heritage.

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Highlight and take notes on this article and prepare a response for discussion in tomorrow's class.

Yesterday -- like other Canadians -- I celebrated my country. But the day was also a time for reflection. I'm proud of this young country, and my own involvement in its development. But I regret not having done more, especially during my tenure as premier of Alberta, to engage my fellow premiers and our ministers of education in a vigorous debate about making a stronger commitment to the teaching of Canadian history.

It is critical that our children know more about our own past, our present and its powerful hold on our future. In survey after survey, Canadians agree that knowledge of our history is important. The success of projects such as Heritage Minutes, TV specials such as Canada: A People's History and feature films, such as *le 15 fevrier 1839*, confirms that the public is fascinated by our stories. But so far, survey after survey has revealed that this interest has not translated into a solid public knowledge and understanding. The transition requires a greater sustained concentration on history in every classroom in the country.

But the road we must travel is as long as the TransCanada itself. With a few recent and notable exceptions in Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, our schools offer little, if any, mandatory Canadian history instruction.

History must be considered as important to a student's basic education as mathematics, science or grammar. Like a science experiment, a sound history lesson provides students with a framework for understanding that the conclusions we draw are the sum of initial hypotheses, good data, and the processes used in gathering and treating the data. A good history education will reveal that the historical narratives we grew up with are dynamic, multidimensional and always open to being recast and re-examined in the context of the present.

The study of history is not rigid, nor based on a fixed set of must-know names and dates. History is relative. A grounding in the past allows for a peripheral view of the present; it's the basis for decisions and opinions that will guide the future.

A good history teacher -- or a good student -- will ask questions. Why is a certain story part of our collective memory? Who's telling the story? What other perspectives might there be? Could it happen today? What is the story's significance?

These are the same types of questions that shape such important issues as social policy, international relations, labour negotiations. History is the best education for teaching students how to assess options in an ambiguous environment.

History is, indeed, its own intellectual discipline. It offers a unique way of thinking that requires development. As with mathematics, you begin with the basics -- learning numbers, then counting, then complex calculations and formulas. When Canadian school systems offer only

one Canadian history course in a child's academic career, they can barely cover the teaching of history's "numbers." This denies young people training in skills critical for success in the 21st century.

Learning our history well involves many forces. Popular culture offers glimpses into our past and gives us a base of stories about our values and experiences. Families and communities provide us with a more intimate understanding of how those stories are personally relevant. But schools remain the place where students acquire the most information about our historical past -- the Iroquois Confederacy, the Winnipeg General Strike, the Patriotes rebellion, the construction of the CPR. It's where young people obtain the context of those stories, and the value of embracing them as part of our collective memory.

We must encourage schools to teach more history, better.

Here's how I'd like to see things change. First, I'd like to see more of the core curriculum devoted to a fuller Canadian history education, one that incorporates not only an understanding of our past but also develops critical thinking skills. All provinces should view Canadian history as critical to a student's development as an informed citizen.

Second, history teachers must be supported with adequate training and resources. The erosion of history as a core subject has also led to a decrease in the number of specialized teachers. Too frequently, the person who teaches history comes from another subject area with little or no personal knowledge or training. If we're to succeed in restoring history as part of the core curriculum we must bridge this gap. The Historica Foundation, of which I'm a board member, does this through its support of annual Summer Institutes for Teachers and through its Web site (www.historica.ca), which offers a rich array of lesson plans and activities.

Finally, teachers need to be able to build upon the other sources of information that form much of our understanding about our past. The gap between history in entertainment and history in the classroom is daunting. Television, cinema and new media provide powerful platforms for a variety of storytellers and content. Their rendering of a historical event is often more compelling and more memorable, if much less complete, than the classroom version.

We can't forget that the history teacher is competing with the likes of Steven Spielberg when studying world wars. Rather than fight these inevitable forces, we should embrace them. Our broadcasters and film producers are making an important contribution to improving historical literacy. Canadian audiences have tuned in, in overwhelming numbers, to portraits of people such as Maurice Duplessis and events such as the demise of the Avro Arrow.

But understanding history isn't just about the story itself, it's about the telling of the story.

As I challenge our provincial and territorial ministries of education and faculties of history and education, I also challenge our broadcasters and producers to help shape the educational process.

Teachers struggle daily to give context to the information students import from home, from television and the Internet. Content providers could support educators by permitting greater low-cost access rights for the use of their productions in classrooms. And they could contribute their research materials toward the development of complementary Web sites and educational products.

Canada's history, our collective memory, must reflect the diversity of our past and of our present. Let's join together to create an inclusive, respectful Canadian history framework, taught by passionate, skilled professionals to all young Canadians.

This way, we will have the ability to speak to each other and to the world with intelligence, sensitivity and perspective. There's no greater gift for this country or her students.