

Critical Race Theory/Woke Cancel Culture

In seeking to maintain and defend the culture, heritage, and history of Canada, a major threat facing Canadian conservatives comes from within the country: the Woke cancel culture movement. It is a recent phenomenon characterized by the imposition of an American critical race theory lens of interpretation on Canadian history, with a concomitant demand by Woke cancel culture zealots that prominent historical personages whom they adjudged to have been a 'racist', a 'colonizer' and/or a 'white supremacist', be 'cancelled' through their removal from the public memory.

It is a presentist approach to history that imposes current social values and beliefs on the past. Critical race theory is non-historical. It rejects historical thinking, historical context, and scholarly research, in favour of rummaging through the historical record to 'out' any prominent historical personage found guilty of making a 'racist' comment, who had any association with slavery, who was an advocate of 'colonialism', and/or was a 'white supremacist'. Once an historical personage is 'outed', the Woke cancel culture activists call for a re-writing of history to remove the name of the offending individual, for the removal of any monuments in the public square that commemorate the individual, and for the re-naming of any edifice, street, or place, that maintains a public memory of the individual. However, the Woke cancel culture zealots have gone beyond demanding the removal of public commemorations recognizing those whom they wish to 'cancel' and have been engaging in acts of vandalism in physically defacing and destroying commemorative monuments.

What is astonishing is the extent to which university administrations and municipal governments have acquiesced in -- or surrendered to -- the demands of Woke cancel culture zealots and particularly so with respect to the removal of the public monuments that commemorate such historic figures as Sir John A. Macdonald, Egerton Ryerson, and Col. Edward Cornwallis.

Statues commemorating Sir John A. Macdonald (1815-1891), Canada's first Prime Minister, have been attacked, damaged, and removed from municipal parks in Kingston, Toronto, Victoria, Regina, Picton, Charlottetown, Montreal, and Kitchener (Baden). The Macdonald statue at the Ontario legislature in Queen's Parks has been vandalized and covered with a tarpaulin, and the Sir John A. Macdonald Law School at Queen's University renamed. (Macdonald has been 'cancelled' for being 'the architect' of the Indian Residential Schools system, while his achievements in the founding of Canada and shaping of its early development, are ignored.)

A statue commemorating Egerton Ryerson, the Chief Superintendent of Education (1844-1876) of Canada West/Ontario, was defaced and beheaded by a Woke mob at Ryerson University, and the remnants of the statue removed from the campus. Subsequently, Ryerson University was renamed by the Board of Governors. It is now Toronto Metropolitan University. (Ryerson was 'cancelled' for his advocacy of educating and assimilating Indigenous Peoples, and for his supposed influence on the later creation of the federal Indian Residential Schools system.)

In Halifax, a statue of Colonel Edward Cornwallis (1713-1776), the founder of the city, has been removed from Cornwallis Park, and the park renamed. (Cornwallis was 'cancelled' for being 'a colonizer', and for establishing a bounty for the scalps of Mi'kmaq warriors who were attacking the new colony. Yet another accusation, totally false, was that Cornwallis was guilty of a campaign of genocide against the Mi'kmaq people.)

What Canadians are witnessing at first hand is the destruction of Canada's tangible cultural heritage in public places, and a purging from the public memory of the legacy of prominent historical figures. They have been condemned by the Woke cancel culture zealots on the basis of unsubstantiated accusations of

being a 'racist' or 'colonizer', and in disregarding a lifetime of outstanding achievement and/or public service.

Within American black communities, the word 'woke' originally referred to being 'awake' to social injustice, racism, and racial inequities in the American experience, and conscious of the need to raise awareness among the public to achieve social and racial justice and put an end to 'white privilege'. Where the writing of history was concerned, there was a call initially for a more diverse, inclusive, and balanced history, and for the application of a broader perspective to include the contributions of blacks to the American experience, the long-term impact of slavery, and the inequities suffered by blacks.

More recently, the Woke culture movement has morphed into an aggressively activist and coercive Woke cancel culture phenomenon. It appears that the transition was generated by the outrage expressed by the Black Lives Matter movement (2013-) against the racism, discrimination, and racial inequities still evident within American society. What is disturbing about the Woke cancel culture movement is the rejection of the earlier Woke culture call for a more inclusive, diverse, and balanced history encompassing different perspective in the American experience, and its replacement by a demand that American history be re-written from a single perspective as viewed through a critical race theory lens of interpretation. The dogmas of the critical race theory regarding race, racism, and colonialism have been adopted by the Woke cancel culture movement and are being used to identify historical personages who are to be 'cancelled'.

Following its emergence among black communities in the United States, the Woke cancel culture phenomenon has spread to other countries where the narrow focus of the critical race theory on racism, and racial and social inequities, has been taken up by other racial communities - and Indigenous peoples in particular -- and even minority ethnic communities. It has given rise to an identity politics based on a litany of grievances, both past and present, and demands for special rights and privileges, that is destroying any concept of a national common good and equality of citizenship, as well as loyalty to one's country, feelings of patriotism, and pride of citizenship. The rapid spread of the Woke cancel culture phenomenon in Canada is quite surprising given ongoing developments pertaining to Canadian history.

In Canada, there has been a surge, over the past half-century, in the publication of scholarly works in the fields of Indigenous Peoples' history, Ethnic history, and Environmental history, as well as in Women's history, which has produced a far more inclusive history embracing different perspectives and values. Moreover, where Indigenous Peoples' history is concerned, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in 2008 by all interest parties and the federal government to investigate the legacy of the Indian Residential Schools system, and 'to advance the process of reconciliation in Canada'. In its final report (December 2015), the Commission submitted a list of '94 calls to action', including a call (# 79) for the development of a "reconciliation framework for Canadian heritage and commemorations" in collaboration with 'survivors, Aboriginal organizations and the arts community'. A sub-section (79- ii) called for:

"Revising the policies, criteria, and practices of the National Program of Historical Commemorations to integrate Indigenous history, heritage values, and memory practices into Canada's national heritage and history".

In an ongoing effort to produce a more unified and inclusive Canadian history, the Parks Canada Agency produced a new system plan, Framework for History and Commemoration (2019), to guide the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada in fulfilling its mandate to commemorate persons, places, and events of national historic significance. The new system plan identified four strategic priorities for commemoration: History of Indigenous Peoples; Environmental History; Diversity; and Canada and the World. More generally, the new System Plan expressed a commitment to expand the scope of the history and commemoration of persons, places, and events to present "broader and more inclusive stories that

represent the diversity and complexity of Canada" by incorporating different histories, perspectives, and voices that "may not previously have been heard".

In response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report 'calls to action', the new System Plan committed Parks Canada to work in cooperation with Indigenous Peoples to ensure that their histories, voices, and perspectives are incorporated into the heritage presentations at the national historic sites administered by Parks Canada. A second specific commitment was for Parks Canada to undertake a review of the existing national historic site designations to determine where additions might be required to a plaque text, or the reasons for the designation changed, or the name of the designation changed "where there is controversy or new research findings".

The priorities established in the new System Plan are highly commendable, but the presentism in the Systems Plan view of history is disturbing. The Introduction states that "to connect with history, it is important to think about complexities, controversies, achievements, failures and tragedies of the past - and to convey how they are relevant today"; and that the purpose of the new approach is to make history more relevant for Canadians today. This raises a question: are future commemorations of national historic significance to be governed by, and reflect, present-day concerns, issues, values, and beliefs?

Moreover, the criteria used in evaluating the existing designations smacks of the imposing of a Woke perspective -- a critical race theory lens - on the public commemoration of Canadian history. Among the criteria applied in selecting the designations for re-evaluation were reportedly "colonial assumptions" and "controversial beliefs and behaviours", which remain unidentified. In total, 208 existing designations -- out of a total of 999 national historic site designations as of 2020 - have been identified for further study, which has raised a further concern that some existing designations of Canadians of an outstanding historical importance and achievement might be 'cancelled'.

Apparently, "barring exceptional circumstances", Parks Canada does not anticipate the complete removal of any existing national historic site designations, or commemorative plaque. However, given the failure of municipal governments and university boards of governors to defend existing public commemorations of historic persons against the Woke cancel culture zealots, there remains the spectre of a purging of Canada's national historic site commemorations, and the imposing of a censorship on new designations of national historic significance. Canadians have every reason to be concerned about a looming threat to their cultural heritage and historical memory as a nation. It is a concern that has been articulated by a former Vice-President of Heritage Conservation and Commemoration at Parks Canada. (See, Larry Ostola, "Ottawa's Naughty List puts some of Canada's most important historical figures on trial", *National Post*, November 2, 2022).

Ostola maintains that where the views of a designated historic person diverge from our modern standard of beliefs and values, "it is appropriate to point that out. But that should not deny their other monumental achievements". With that proviso, one might add that the Historic Sites and Monuments Board should continue to employ its traditional criteria for evaluating the national historic significance of persons, places, and events: viz. having a nationally significant impact on Canadian history; or illustrating a nationally important aspect of that history; or embodying or representing a particular achievement of national historic significance. It will be far better to expand the scope of designations rather than engage in cancelling existing commemorations or restricting future commemorations to those who held values and beliefs consistent with our modern standards. It is the only way to achieve a truly inclusive, balanced, and diverse history that recognizes both the positive and negative aspects of the Canadian experience.

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