

Harper's history: does the right hand know  
what the other right hand is doing.

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

Reg Whitaker

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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

*Reg Whitaker (bio)*

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

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 **[End Page 218]** 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

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- Multiculturalism and the liberal advance of equality rights

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