

CITIZENSHIP IN CANADA: A REVIEW ESSAY

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Intent for a Nation: What is Canada for? A Relentlessly Optimistic Manifesto for Canada's Role in the World

By Michael Byers

Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007.

The Unfinished Canadian: The People We Are

By Andrew Cohen

Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007.

Who Killed Canadian History? Revised Edition.

By J.L. Granatstein

Toronto: Harper Perennial, [1998] 2007.

Who We Are: A Citizen's Manifesto

By Rudyard Griffiths

Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009.

A Look at Canada

By Citizenship and Immigration Canada

Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2005.

According to historian Andreas Fahrmeir (2007), popular conceptions of citizenship are relatively new, having emerged as recently as the mid-twentieth century. In western societies in particular, only once (1) national immigration policies disavowed racial discrimination; (2) the expansion of the welfare state enabled a greater proportion of national populations to benefit from government-sponsored enterprises; and (3) new laws facilitated the transition of long-term, non-native state residents into full-fledged members of society did formal citizenship acquire the broad-based political connotations that it has today.¹ In Canada, the meaning of citizenship—or alternatively, the question of what makes someone “Canadian”—has consistently engaged some of the country’s leading political thinkers, many of whom also comment regularly on Canada’s place in the world. The linkage in their interests reflects the impact of the way Canadians see themselves as a people on how they view their country’s global role.

This essay reviews some of the more recent efforts to consider the intersection of citizenship with foreign policy. Although its conclusions are hopeful, they are also cautionary. The Canadian political elite have yet to think about citizenship policy seriously, and strategically. The recommendations in these books suggest a number of actions worth taking.

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¹ For a detailed discussion of the meaning(s) of citizenship, see [Fahrmeir, 2007].

If, however, Ottawa continues to ignore the impact of diminishing popular engagement with, and understanding of, the nation's past, Canada's future looks much less promising.

Historian J.L. Granatstein's *Who Killed Canadian History*, now in its second edition, is best known for its condemnation of the decline of the study and understanding of history at the national level. "History is important because it helps people know themselves," Granatstein argues. "It tells them who they were and who they are; it is the collective memory of humanity that situates them in their time and place; and it provides newcomers with some understanding of the society in which they have chosen to live" (p. 5). "Without historical knowledge and inquiry," he maintains, "we cannot achieve the informed citizenship that is essential for effective participation in the democratic process" (p. 21).

Journalist and fellow best-selling author Andrew Cohen largely agrees. To Cohen, "[c]itizenship was about loyalty, community, maturity, unity. It was about nation-building. It still is" (p. 136). Cohen believes in the merits of a strong, central government, in the value of federal institutions, and in the need for Canadians to examine themselves and their country more critically.

Public intellectual Rudyard Griffiths shares many of the same views. The founder and former executive director of the Dominion Institute (now known as the Historica-Dominion Institute), a group that prospered in the aftermath of the publication of Granatstein's first edition of *Who Killed Canadian History*, argues that "our highest duty as a people is to build institutions and inculcate values that unite us around a shared vision for our society, one that reflects the historical and social realities of our nation, Canada" (p. xiv). Like Granatstein and Cohen, Griffiths is concerned about the lack of history taught in Canadian schools and, more generally, the "diluted version of citizenship" (p. 18) that dominates contemporary national understandings of Canada and its place in the world. In *Who We Are: A Citizen's Manifesto*, he worries that, "if we cannot find our way back to an appreciation of our shared nationhood—its symbols, institutions and common citizenship—we will be transformed, within a generation, into an ornery amalgam or 'national' groups and regional fiefdoms, adrift in the backwaters of the global economy and peripheral to the larger trajectory of world events" (p. 26).

Unlike the other authors considered here, legal scholar Michael Byers is, in his own words, relentlessly optimistic. Writing about Canada from a distinctly twenty-first century perspective, he sees an opportunity to embrace a "broad and proactive conception of global citizenship." What Canadians must do, he proclaims in *Intent for a Nation: What is Canada for?*, "is care about words and ideas, about the impact they're having on our world, and want to turn that caring into committed engagement and internationalism" (p. 225). It is Byers' conception of citizenship that is reflected in Citizenship and Immigration Canada's most recent edition of *A Look at Canada*, the primer issued by the federal government for new immigrants who plan to take the citizenship test. It is also Byers' view that, while well-intentioned, it is the most problematic for Canada's, and Canadians', future.

All of the authors view citizenship as a privilege and maintain that with it should come responsibilities. According to Granatstein, the failure of successive federal and provincial governments to educate Canadians about their past has left too many bereft of a sense of duty to contribute to the long-term betterment of society; nonetheless, he deplores, they remain

pleased to accept the benefits that their Canadian citizenship provides. Granatstein calls on Canadians to accept that, as citizens, they must be loyal to Canada and its values, regardless of their personal or familial origins. While elements of his prescription are controversial—parts of chapter 4, “Multicultural Mania,” will undoubtedly offend some readers—his underlying message, which is more moderate and inclusive than it was ten years ago, resonates. Good citizens must be informed, and that requires an understanding of the nation’s past.

Granatstein’s more detailed policy prescriptions have had a limited impact. As the introduction to the revised edition laments, “[i]f only the message had been accepted” (p. xiii). *Who Killed Canadian History?* places the onus on Canada’s politicians to act, but it does so without providing them with sufficient incentive to do so. It is true that Canadians’ awareness of their history is a national embarrassment, and it is equally true that this lack of historical understanding undermines constructive notions of citizenship and threatens to erode any long-term sense of national unity. But Canada has survived to this point, and it is therefore unlikely that minority governments (of any political stripe), all of which seem to struggle to plan beyond the next confidence vote in the House of Commons, will interpret Granatstein’s concerns as urgent problems any time soon.² *Who Killed Canadian History?*’s message would resonate more clearly today were Granatstein to draw attention to the ignorance of Canada’s political leaders. Rather than noting, for example, that *students* in seven of Canada’s ten provinces can graduate high school without having taken a course in Canadian history, he might have observed that Ottawa will eventually welcome a *prime minister* who has never studied Canada’s past, or that it is already likely that *servicing members of Parliament* at the federal and provincial levels have never taken high school history.³ Such public humiliation would likely attract media attention, forcing the political leadership to take notice. In summary, Granatstein’s message is the right one, and if his goal was to expose a problem to the widest popular audience, his accessible style, clear argument, and impressive research make *Who Killed Canadian History?* a success. But if he intended to change government policy, he might have addressed his target audience more persuasively.

Like Granatstein, Andrew Cohen is an excellent writer. He uses straightforward language to convey thoughtful, complex ideas, and argues passionately without being overbearing. This approach was instrumental in making his *While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World* (2003) a popular success, and it serves him similarly well in his quasi-sequel, *The Unfinished Canadian: The People We Are*. Cohen agrees with Granatstein on the impact of Canadians’ ignorance of their history: “Because we do not know our past,” he writes, “we cannot teach it to our children and to our compatriots who have come from abroad” (p. 55). He is proud of Canada’s historical record, and notes that if Canadians knew themselves better, they would feel greater national pride. Like Granatstein, he advocates national standards in history education. He wants schoolchildren to visit national museums and galleries. He supports a charter of responsibilities, obligatory public service, and increases to the foreign aid budget, and he opposes accepting new citizens who cannot speak either of Canada’s official languages.

Cohen’s argument is reasonable, inspiring, and equally unlikely to effect change. The policy prescriptions are expensive,⁴ and *The Unfinished Canadian* fails to create the sense

² That previous majority governments did not act boldly is much more disappointing.

³ The uninformed, and oftentimes fallacious, statements coming from members of Parliament during the constitutional crisis of the winter of 2008-2009 suggest that the effects of this problem have already reached the political level.

⁴ In his defence, Cohen published his book before the global recession affected Canada’s fiscal health.

of urgency necessary to convince a modern-day Canadian prime minister to make Cohen's citizenship agenda a priority. The author's own words illustrate the problem: "We don't stand on guard for thee any more; Canadians stand on guard for us. Well, not really. It hasn't come to this—not yet" (p. 150). Regrettably, for today's policy makers, "not yet" rarely seems sufficient to justify a significant political investment in change.

Rudyard Griffiths is clearer about the challenges facing Canada in the immediate future. He identifies three: "global warming, mass migration, and a fast-aging population" (p. 11), and argues that Canadians must rediscover who they are if they hope to tackle these challenges effectively. *Who We Are: A Citizen's Manifesto* advocates "a single, equal and inspiring civic identity" (p. 15), an idea that will inspire some but will be anathema to Quebec nationalists, among others. Griffiths also echoes Granatstein's and Cohen's calls for greater centralization at the federal level, more history education, and immigration reform. Some of his historical interpretations are questionable—he underestimates the British influence in Canada in the early post-Second World War years and exaggerates Canada's impact on the foundation of NATO (pp. 123, 125, 133)—but again, the core argument is attractive. "Canada was founded and evolved as a nation of citizens," he maintains, "not a collection of communities. We are a people who have long operated according to a series of hard-won principles and beliefs about the purpose of our society" (p. 151).

Some of Griffiths' policy prescriptions appear achievable. Asking students to pass a civic literacy test before receiving their high school diploma, lengthening the residency requirement before individuals can apply for citizenship, enhancing the linguistic demands on prospective immigrants, and even increasing the fees for non-resident citizens who wish to renew their passports are all ideas that—if the political will existed at the federal level and could be translated into an openness to extensive consultations with Canada's provincial and territorial governments—might be implemented without significant public outcry. Griffiths' calls to revise the way the federal government funds immigration settlement, to make voting in Canadian elections mandatory, and to implement a national program of civic service are more contentious.

Taken together, *Who Killed Canadian History?*, *The Unfinished Canadian*, and *Who We Are* convey a thoughtful, sincere, and credible call for government action to rescue what is left of the idea of Canadian citizenship. The authors demonstrate a profound appreciation for Canada's past and the role of history in creating a sustainable understanding of what does and should make one Canadian. Ironically, as much as the authors are frustrated and disappointed in the contemporary state of affairs, it is their idealism—their belief that Canada's political leadership will care enough to act in advance of a national crisis—that appears to prevent them from advocating more strategically.

Michael Byers' *Intent for a Nation* is everything that the other texts are not: optimistic, openly and proudly anti-American, and selective in its interpretation of Canadian history. Byers' understanding of Canada's past leads him to argue that his country is "the envy of the world": "a powerful country" with an obligation to effect progressive change internationally (p. 4). While the United States tortures its people, conducts search-and-destroy missions, and appears to support "the insanity of a new global arms race" (p. 78), Byers' Canada has always promoted peace, defended human rights, and championed international humanitarian law (p. 38).

If only he were right. Byers has spent his life “learning, reading, thinking, and teaching about Canada’s place in the world,” but he appears to have done so without a firm, critical grasp of the country’s history. Canada did *not* attend the Dumbarton Oaks Conference, for example, which took place *before* the end of the Second World War because it was not invited. Moreover, to suggest that Canada might ever have been granted a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (p. 101) is bizarre.⁵ Indeed, Canadian John Humphrey was active in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (p. 102), but new research has demonstrated that hesitations towards the document were “broadly-based, deeply-felt, and widely-shared within the Canadian bureaucracy” (English, 1998: 84).

Byers’ recollection of the Suez Crisis (pp. 58, 100, 102) is equally selective. He ignores Lester Pearson’s efforts to preserve the reputation of his French and British allies and the Canadian government’s active and thorough cooperation with US ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to pass a much modified peacekeeping resolution at the general assembly. Pearson compromised on his ideals because that was what it took to bring the United Nations Emergency Force into being (Holmes, 2007). And as for why the United States agreed to the Auto Pact after now Prime Minister Pearson criticized US policy on Vietnam, again Byers ignores the evidence. “The United States,” he writes, “so heavily dependent on its northern neighbour, knows better than to allow differences of opinion to be blown out of proportion or to link a dispute on one issue to continued co-operation on another, unrelated issue” (p. 240). A more reasonable interpretation is evident in Pearson’s memoirs. After his government supported US interests by hastily coordinating a UN peacekeeping mission to Cyprus, Pearson describes President Lyndon Johnson’s profound appreciation: “You’ll never know what this has meant, having those Canadians off to Cyprus and being there tomorrow....Now, what can I do for you?” Pearson’s initial response was nothing, for that moment. But, he writes, “I had some credit in the bank” (Pearson, 1975: 135). The Auto Pact was finalized not much later.⁶

It is not, then, that Byers’ advocacy of a new, Canadian conception of global citizenship is somehow wrong, or entirely problematic. His call for a profoundly un-American foreign policy might alienate a portion of the national electorate, but it is hardly more divisive than Granatstein’s opinions on multiculturalism, Cohen’s insistence on the need for strong, central governance, or Griffiths’ condemnation of the Harper government’s “Québécois as a nation” resolution. Furthermore, Byers’ plea for Canadians to become activists in world affairs is laudable (p. 225). To argue, however, that such efforts would be consistent with a national historical tradition is misleading. Canadian history is characterized by ambitious rhetoric and cautious policies. Peacekeeping operations have generally been undertaken with the blessing of, and the support of, Canada’s neighbour and ally to the south. Indeed, Upper North Americans, as one historian has recently called them (Stuart, 2007), have more in common than Byers suggests.⁷ If constructive citizenship is founded upon a common understanding of the nation’s past, one that is grounded in evidence as opposed to wishful thinking, then Byers’ approach cannot succeed.

⁵ Having personally conducted research on this topic in over twenty archival libraries in three countries, I cannot fathom how Byers might have ever come to such a conclusion. See Chapnick (2005).

⁶ Johnson’s gratitude for Canada’s work on the Cyprus situation was confirmed by a number of former foreign policy practitioners during my research on Pearson’s long-time colleague, John Holmes.

⁷ Cohen does a masterful job of undermining Byers’ evidence in this case in the chapter “The American Canadian.”

Regrettably, the most recent edition of *A Look at Canada* relies on much of the same relentless optimism as does *Intent for a Nation*. Again, the point is not that publications about Canada should emphasize the negative, but rather that, to contribute productively to Canadian society, future citizens should have access to a realistic summary of the national historical experience before they arrive. For example, Canada has opened its doors to immigrants since its inception fairly consistently, but to suggest that immigration policy has been motivated primarily by its impact on “the diversity and richness of Canadian society” (p. 3) ignores a long history of racial restrictions that only began to be removed in earnest in the late 1950s. The forty-seven-page booklet also notes, “We are proud of the fact that we are a peaceful nation. In fact, Canadians act as peacekeepers in many countries around the world” (p. 7). And while Canadians certainly solve most internal disputes in an admirably civilized manner, with less than two hundred peacekeepers currently in the field, but over two thousand troops fighting a war in Afghanistan, one wonders why peacekeeping is portrayed as “our international role,” and the country’s NATO commitments are ignored.

The two pages on “Canada’s History and Symbols” mention Confederation, Sir John A. Macdonald, and the *Constitution Act*, 1982, but nothing more. Readers do not learn that Canadians fought in two world wars and are part of the closest two-way trading relationship in the world. Canadians are encouraged to join an environmental group, to help their neighbours, and to run for office. Yet joining the military—an institution which is in desperate need of new recruits, pays reasonably, and is actively seeking individuals with diverse cultural experience—is never mentioned.

Future citizens are directed to believe that Canada is a peaceable kingdom: an environmental and peacekeeping leader with a history of tolerance and multiculturalism that reaches back to its foundations. This ultimately misleading summary creates false and unreasonable expectations of a country, which Granatstein, Cohen, and Griffiths all point out has a history that need not be denied. Canada is a progressive nation: a responsible and reliable player on the world stage that, over the last century and a half, has made a noteworthy contribution to international peace and security. Perhaps if the goal of the primer were merely to recruit as many citizens as possible, then the focus on peace and peacekeeping might be understandable. But if the aim is to attract long-term contributing members of Canadian society, the emphasis is misleading, at best.

Considering the five publications together, the state of citizenship in Canada today has not reached the point of crisis. Passionate advocates with a variety of views of the country and its global role remain committed to increasing popular engagement and restoring civic pride. But the future is worrisome. The deterioration of national historical understanding threatens to deprive Canadians of the context that they will need to make a difference in their country and in the world. New immigrants continue to be presented with a romantic account of Canadian history which erases Canada’s military achievements and promotes a national viewpoint that is grounded in mythology instead of evidence. Most troubling, even leading national analysts have yet to discover a means of conveying the sense of urgency that should be associated with a future crisis of citizenship to the federal leadership. Hopefully, someone will figure out how before it is too late.

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