

The latest Canada Day quiz shows many of us are in the dark about war and peace

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To what transatlantic military alliance do Canada, Europe and the United States belong? What international body – similar to the League of Nations – was established after the Second World War? Can you name two military or peacekeeping operations since 1990 to which Canada has sent troops?

If you can't answer, you are not alone – neither could a majority of Canadians. Canadians received poor marks in this year's Canada Day history quiz, conducted annually by the Dominion Institute and Ipsos-Reid.

Marks varied widely across regions, with Alberta, BC and Ontario passing the test and Quebec, Atlantic Canada, Saskatchewan and Manitoba flunking. The 10-question quiz was designed by a blue-ribbon panel of historians and handed out to 1,055 adults. Half of the test-takers failed.

For Rudyard Griffiths, executive director of the Dominion Institute, this year's quiz was added evidence that Canadians need to re-learn their history.

"If we're debating the future of Canadian foreign policy and we can't even name one peacekeeping mission or military operation that the country has participated in [during] the last decade, then it seems we're having that debate in a historical vacuum," he said.

On the peacekeeping and military operations question, only 41% of Canadians could identify two Ottawa-backed missions since 1990. 29% named one while 31% couldn't name any – despite the fact that Canada has sent troops to 16 different military or peacekeeping operations since 1990.

On other questions, only one in 10 respondents was familiar with the International Criminal Court, and only two in 10 with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

On the plus side, 77% of Canadians identified land mines as the military weapon that Canada and Diana, Princess of Wales, rallied much of the international community to ban. And more than half of respondents correctly associated the military operation D-Day with the invasion of France.

The province-to-province variation in scores was larger than usual this year, with Albertans being the most likely to pass (60%) and Quebeckers the least likely (39%). Quebec typically performs the worst, partly because its curriculum follows a different historical narrative than that of the rest of Canada, Mr. Griffiths said.

As for why Albertans scored the highest – a result that's also in line with previous trends – Mr. Griffiths pointed to the high correlation between people in Albertan having higher levels of income and having better opportunities to learn basic facts about Canada.

"Alberta is a very prosperous province, and there's probably a connection between people in Alberta having higher levels of income and having better opportunities to learn basic facts about Canada."

A majority of Canadians 35% or older (55%) passed the test, while just 39% of younger adults passed. Older respondents were much more likely to identify apartheid as the South African policy which Canada led international opposition to. 57% got the question right, as opposed for 34% of younger individuals.

Men scored better than women – 59% to 42%. This year's quiz featured a disproportionate number of military-related questions, which men tend to score better on, Mr. Griffiths said.

That said, men performed better on all questions except the land mines question, where the reference to Diana tipped off many respondents.

In fact, the most successfully answered questions tended to be those whose topics often resurfaced in mainstream media reports, Mr. Griffiths said. He sees this as a problem: “Our public memory has the attention span of the 24-hour media cycle. We seem to be having less and less a unified understanding of what’s important in Canadian history and why.”

Who’s to blame for Canada’s scant historical self-knowledge? The country’s schools, according to retired professor Jack Granatstein, one of the historians who helped designed the quiz.

“The schools have failed very substantially all across Canada for 35 years or so to teach any kind of history,” he said. “They teach it very badly.”

As a starting point for improvement, more provinces should force high-school students to take a history course before graduating. Regions that already do so – such as Ontario, BC and Alberta – did better on this year’s quiz.

“If only four provinces have compulsory history courses, you shouldn’t be surprised that in most of the country, a lot of people don’t think history has any importance,” Mr. Granatstein said. “It’s quite striking that the provinces that take history seriously score best on a simple quiz like this.”

And the only way government will bolster their history curriculums is if parents begin pressuring their politicians.

“It’s up to the taxpayers in each province to tell their politicians they want change. I hope this quiz makes a few people unhappy.”

Because education falls under provincial jurisdiction, any new changes would have to be enacted by provincial governments. But there is one thing that Ottawa can do, the Dominion Institute says: It can force all young Canadians to take a history quiz every time they want a new passport.

Those who fail would still get a passport but those who pass could be awarded a different-coloured version. For Mr. Griffiths, such a test would be similar to the citizenship exam immigrants must take.

“Contrary to what you’d expect, immigrants know as much or slightly more than [other] Canadians about the country’s history and political institutions. They take those tests very seriously, and take a responsibility to learn something about the country.”