

136 years old on July 1 and we hardly even know you

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Oh, Canada . . . you're 136 years old and we hardly even know you. July 1 is Canada's day for civic celebrations and public activities, but studies and general conversation indicate that most Canadians have little idea of what (and why) we are celebrating.

For the past six years, the Dominion Institute has conducted an annual Canada Day quiz and this year, as every other year, the results were dismal: Canadians remain remarkably ignorant about their past and collective accomplishments.

The 2003 quiz focused on Canada's participation in international events and institutions since the Second World War. The topic is particularly relevant and the results particularly illuminating given the current state of world affairs and ongoing discussions about Canada's diminishing global influence.

Less than half of Canadians (44 per cent) know that modern-day peacekeeping is a Canadian institution that stems back to Lester B. Pearson and his efforts to resolve the Suez Crisis. Acting as peacekeepers rather than aggressors has had a significant impact on the development of military policies and participation in military roles, yet 31 per cent of Canadians couldn't name a single peacekeeping/military mission that Canada has participated in since 1990. Somalia, Rwanda, Afghanistan and Bosnia are just four of 16 possible answers and probably ring a bell, yet they are easily forgotten when one doesn't grasp that information within the context of knowing that Canada has a historic role as an international peacekeeper.

Further, only 50 per cent of Canadians knew that Canada led international opposition to the South African government's policy of apartheid. Despite priding ourselves in being leaders of human rights at home and abroad, just 21 per cent knew that Canada was instrumental in drafting the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Only 10 per cent knew Canada played a major role in the creation of the International Criminal Court to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity. Despite our constant (and obviously empty) ideological chatter about human rights, few of us seem to know about Canada's efforts to do something about this problem on a global scale.

Our collective knowledge of Canada's past role in international affairs is clearly abysmal. Consequently, Rudyard Griffiths, executive director of the Dominion Institute, is right to state that Canadians are debating foreign policies and direction of military operations "in a historical vacuum." If we don't know what we have accomplished, how can we know how to direct our present and future international efforts?

Canadian culture has evolved significantly in the past 50 years; it has become increasingly multicultural and pluralistic. But our foundation, the events and accomplishments of our collective past, is unchanging and should serve to define Canada's present and future global initiatives.

U.S. columnist William F. Buckley wrote that Americans have a "covenant with the past." That is, a duty to carry on the efforts of those who acted to create and preserve American liberty. So too Canadians have a covenant with their past, and this commitment invokes a duty to pursue leadership on the international scene and to strive for the global peace that is so desperately needed.

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