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Public discourse isn?t... toast

BROCK'S BANTER

By Brock Weir

If you're a Canadian of my generation, chances are you have a small, lingering distrust of burnt toast.

It's not that we necessarily have an aversion to the food product, the preferred lightness or darkness of a piece of toasted bread is a very personal decision?and the subject of debate that can get strangely heated, but I digress.

It is those pesky Heritage Minutes we grew up with.

The image of a woman getting a waft of rapidly-charring bread emanating from a nearby appliance, followed by a blurry drop to the floor and an awakening on a hospital operating table as one Dr. Wilder Penfield poked and prodded inside her opened skull to get closer to finding treatments for epilepsy and other neurological issues, sticks with a person.

In fact, it has stuck with people so much that when Historica Canada, the producers of the Heritage Minutes, sponsored a local event during the Canada 150 celebrations in 2017, one of the souvenirs participants young and old could leave with was a green and black lapel pin with the legend, ?Doctor, I smell burnt toast!? emblazoned across the very same foodstuff.

These Heritage Minutes are a good primer on the rich history this country has just ready to be explored, but by no means is it a comprehensive snapshot of where we've been as a country and, of course, no indication of where we might be going.

Ahead of those sesquicentennial celebrations, the producers of these Heritage Minutes began tackling more difficult parts of our shared history, from the tragic story of Chanie Wenjack to highlight the atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples, the harrowing but inspiring story of Viola Desmond, journeys of the ?Boat People? who came to Canada from Vietnam in the 1970s, the impacts of the Acadian Deportation ? not to mention, continuing with the theme of medical milestones reached in Canada, the discovery of Insulin 100 years ago this year.

This shift closer towards a warts-and-all approach is a wonderful move, and particularly timely for up-and-coming generations who might be able to avoid the pitfalls that so many people appear to have fallen into: the idea that Canadian history, and the people who made it, is something that can be condensed down to a minute-long snapshot.

We seem to be living in a world today where people are having an increasingly hard time with having their worldviews challenged. Perhaps it can be chalked up to education, perhaps it's the ever-more-prevalent appetite to seek our echo chambers from behind a screen, but it is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Now, on those occasions where protecting a myopic worldview can't be avoided, such as the ongoing recovery of thousands of bodies associated with Residential Schools, the reaction is usually immediate and often angry.

There an idea that having anything but an idealized version of what Canada is, the ones that used to be spoon-fed to elementary school students, the ones bubbling over with heroes and disproportionately less villains, the ones devoid of anything but the most cursory evidence of critical thinking, is somehow unpatriotic or wrong.

That the men and women who played an inextricable part in our country are two-dimensional, never-complex figures meriting no further exploration into who they are and what really made them tick.

That recognizing past wrongs in our history, however long ago these wrongs were committed, is somehow a sign of weakness.

That any attempt to right any of the aforesaid wrongs is worse still and a sledgehammer to the pillars that hold our nation up.

I don't think younger Canadians will uphold this less-than-storied tradition. Thankfully, there now appears to be an appetite in schools and within students themselves to get a more holistic diet of our history, but there are plenty of torch-bearers of all generations that still need to be contended with.

The ones who treated the move to lower the Canadian flag following the Kamloops discovery with disdain and (a) an affront to the men and women who fought under the flag, and any of its many preceding iterations; (b) yet another sign of weakness; (c) another sign of ?wokeness,? which used to be termed simply as ?another viewpoint?; or (d) any combination of the above.

The ones who get all hot and bothered about a statue being removed, or a school being renamed, without taking a single moment to listen to the whys and wherefores before forming an opinion.

The ones who compare mask mandates and the decision of employers to require their employees to be vaccinated to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, or, at absolute, almost-unfathomable worst, to genocides.

Yet another argument in favour of a critical history lesson.

Canada is by no means the only country experiencing this phenomenon right now.

One only has to look as far as the United States' ongoing identity crisis over what they so clinically term ?Critical Race Theory? to see how visceral the idea of ?critical? thinking can be.

Despite the hue and cry from various media outlets, I don't see the problem in kids grasping the concept that not everyone has been able to pursue the so-called ?American Dream? (or ?Canadian Dream? for that matter) from an equal footing without history ? social, political or otherwise ? sadly stacking the deck against certain individuals or groups.

Or that recognizing ?white privilege? simply means being conscious that other groups might have certain disadvantages and by no means does it mean you're racist; it simply builds awareness and awareness-building often leads to difference-making.

People often complain about the increasing heat that has become part and parcel of our public discourse, much for the worse. And I am one of those complainers. I miss the days when people were able to share opinions with each other, agree to disagree, and put their heads together to find common ground.

One of the best ways to throw water on the fire is to steel yourself, move out of your self-imposed bubbles, and take the time to listen ? not just to the people who will shore up your own perspectives, but to others who might be able to cast further light on the world around you.