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# ERASE OUR HISTORY, ERASE OURSELVES

By Jack Mintz  
The Trudeau government is out to erase Canadian history from the Canadian Royal Crown and our passports

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Jack MintzThe Trudeau government has come under fire for dropping historical symbols from the Canadian Royal Crown and our national passport. I recently renewed my passport, which I was happy to receive by mail within 20 working days. It's stamped with the royal coat of arms on the front cover and historic pictures of Samuel de Champlain, the Fathers of Confederation, Parliament, Niagara Falls and others printed on pages.

**What holds Canada together?**  
His focus is the toppling of statues and destruction of symbols in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and the growing hostility to any reference to slavery, colonization or racism. Not only have statues of Christopher Columbus, Winston Churchill, Voltaire and John A. Macdonald been toppled or defaced, but their names have also been removed from schools and other buildings.

Luckily, I chose the 10-year expiration so I get to enjoy looking at them for another decade.

Removing religious and historical symbols from Canada's passport and crown is not quite in the same league as defacing statues, but it is still literally iconoclastic, in the sense of the Greek eikonoklastes, meaning "image destroyer." We typically think of iconoclasm as criticism of or opposition to widely held beliefs and practices, but decisions to erase historical symbols are just as politically driven.

The Liberal attempt to erase history is not the first nor last attempt by governments to do so. In his extensively-researched 2022 book, *Monumental Fury: The History of Iconoclasm and the Future of Our Past*, Matthew Fraser, professor of communication, media and culture at the American University of Paris and former editor-in-chief of this newspaper, lays out the history of iconoclasm in stark detail. Trudeau is out to erase Canadian history

Fraser divides iconoclasm into three types: religion, revolution and revolt. Religious iconoclasm, as in the Taliban's destruction of the ancient



Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, is an example of destroying statues to erase religious ties. The Taliban are not the only guilty party, however. Early Christians destroyed pagan statues and religious idols in the Roman empire, while the Spanish destroyed Mexico's Aztec symbols in the name of the Christian faith.

Revolution is another reason older symbols of authority are destroyed. Historical attempts to erase history in support of regime change include removing Catholic symbols in Henry VIII's England, defacing George III's statue in lower Manhattan during the American Revolution and obliterating "bourgeois" monuments in China and Russia to promote communist ideology. And, of course, the fall of Communism saw statues of Mao and Stalin go the way of many of their pre-communist predecessors.

Spontaneous outbreaks of iconoclasm often reflect claims of victimhood and remedy for past injustice. Examples include 16th-century violence in Dutch provinces against the Hapsburg monarchy or the 2021 toppling of statues of Queens Victoria and Elizabeth II in Winnipeg during the furor over possible unmarked graves found near Indigenous residential schools.

We are overly inclined to either support or condemn iconoclasm reflecting our personal values at a particular time. But what we view as unacceptable today might have been broadly agreed to by past generations. And what we feel is right today may be viewed as wrong behaviour in the future. I wonder if future generations won't consider today's cancellation of controversial speakers or university hires as having been beyond the pale.

In the long view, attempts to erase kings, queens and prime ministers from our history are neither sensible nor desirable. Their decisions helped form our institutions. We should understand the motives, good and bad, that drove them.

John A. Macdonald was far from perfect. But his National Policy, including relatively open immigration, was critical to ensure Canada became one country from sea to sea. No prime minister who followed did as much to make that happen as Macdonald.

Yes, Canadian immigration policy was itself imperfect, becoming very restrictive, especially after 1919, and reaching its nadir, perhaps, with the turning back in 1939 of a boatload of Jewish refugees, condemning them to Nazi death camps. Even after the Second World War, Canada continued to restrict Jewish refugees desperate for a new home.

During this dark period, Prime Minister Mackenzie King supported his top immigration official, Frederick Blair, who was responsible for these decisions. Should we tear down King's statue or remove his name from buildings and schools, including from a high school in a Jewish

neighbourhood of Toronto? So far, the cancellers have only been concerned with Macdonald, not a Liberal prime minister with serious skeletons in his closet.

In Fraser's taxonomy of iconoclasm, the current erasing of history from our crown and passports is a puzzle. British and French symbols, so important in our history, have not become unacceptable to most Canadians. Nor are most of us affronted by Samuel de Champlain or Terry Fox – so why are they being replaced with squirrels and bears? Neither are we undergoing a political revolution, although it could be a cultural one. If so, "woke" proponents need to convincingly revise history, not erase it.

In 2023 it's the Liberals who are erasing our history. But what goes around often comes around. It may not be too many years before someone else banishes the Liberals' symbols in condemnation for what future Canadians regard as their personal and policy sins.

If we erase all history, we lose connection to ourselves.

Jack Mintz is an economist and a trustee at the Aristotle Foundation for Public Policy.