



# THE HARPER RECORD

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# Harper's Museum and Art Gallery Policy

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*Cultural devolution and privatization*

Howie West

LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE governments have historically underfunded Canadian culture. It has been a long-standing problem for Canadians who work in, support, and appreciate the museums and art galleries that enhance our understanding and enjoyment of our culture. Before coming to power, Harper's Tories had promised to address what the Canadian Museums Association says is a 34-year-old funding gap.<sup>1</sup>

Instead, the Harper government is continuing the process of starving museums and galleries of much-needed funding. In addition, they have cut programs and are enthusiastically engaging in a program of privatization and devolution. They appear to be deliberately trying to sabotage any expressions of Canadian culture that don't fit into their ideological assumption that Canada is a collection of market economies that simply co-exist.

Conservative policy around museums and art galleries underscores this ideological crusade. In particular, since coming to power, the Conservatives have initiated a process to privatize and devolve the National Portrait Gallery of Canada. At the same time, they have cut other services like the Museums Assistance Program and the Exhibit Transportation Services that support the regionalization of art and culture. These cuts are only a snapshot of one part of the broader

Conservative attack on Canadian community and identity. (See Rae, Flecker, and the Ad Hoc Coalition on Women's Equality elsewhere in this volume.) Independent Research organizations like the CLBC and the CPRN, as well as literacy and countless other public community building initiatives, have also been cut. Still, these cuts demonstrate the inconsistency between what the Harper government says and what it truly wants.

In a 1997 CBC interview, while he was still the spokesperson for the National Citizens Coalition, Stephen Harper was asked if there was a Canadian culture. "Yes, in a very loose sense," Harper replied, "It consists of regional cultures within Canada, regional cultures that cross borders with the U.S. We're part of a worldwide Anglo-American culture. And there is a continental culture."

When asked a question by Patrice Roy during the French-language leaders' debate in June 2004, Harper said that many Canadian cultural programs may not benefit the general public but instead only "friends of the Liberal party." Referring to the cancellation of the National Portrait Gallery, author Andrew Cohen noted that the government's agenda was less about allowing Canadians to view Canada's cultural and historical legacy and a lot more about an ideological view of devolution that the Harper government clings to.

The Harper government displays a tendency to peevishly dismiss anything the previous Liberal government initiated. Minister of Canadian Heritage Josée Verner defends Conservative museum policy by comparing it to the policies of a "visionless, centralizing [Liberal] government." All of this has led to a neoliberal cultural policy that Cohen called "cultural devolution."<sup>2</sup>

The auction of the long-awaited National Portrait Gallery is the most revealing example of this devolution. Initially, the National Portrait Gallery was supposed to be housed in a distinctive location on Wellington Street in Ottawa, across from Parliament Hill, while becoming an integral part of the National Museum network. The Portrait Gallery was first conceived under the Chrétien Liberals in 2001. Many observers referred to it as a Jean Chrétien legacy. This perception appears to be at least part of the problem. "Put yourself in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's position," opines *The Ottawa Citizen*. "Across the

street from the Parliament Building is a daily reminder of former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's regime."

The former U.S. embassy that was going to house the Gallery is a stately and historic Ottawa building. By 2006, work had already begun on renovating the building to ensure that it met all of the conservatory and aesthetic requirements suitable for a national monument dedicated to housing national treasures. Writing to *The Ottawa Citizen*, one observer eloquently called it "a gathering of images and stories about famous Canadians and ordinary folk — people who have made Canada the country it is... It is the mirror that reflects who we are. It tells about our aspirations, hardships borne, and difficulties overcome."<sup>3</sup> An internationally famous architect, Edward Jones, who had previously designed the acclaimed Ondaatje Wing at the National Portrait Gallery in London, England, had been retained to design the plans for the new Gallery.

None of this mattered to the Conservatives. Although \$11 million had already been spent on the project, the Harper government cut the funding shortly after coming to power. Although the government publicly denied it, the spending estimates that were released in September 2006 showed that no money had been allocated for the Portrait Gallery. Instead, a year later, on November 12, 2007, the government posted a Request for Proposals on the Public Works website, which advised that "developers are responsible for mobilizing community and private sector resources and support" for the project.

Private consortia in nine major Canadian cities were invited to compete. Their proposals are to be judged according to four criteria: a prominent, accessible and suitable location; developer expertise and financial capability; financial support from the private sector and community; and the financial deal or offer. Usually a selection process for a public project includes an architectural competition that helps choose the design skills appropriate for a public monument. The Harper RFP for the Portrait Gallery does not even include design as one of the criteria. The process being used is more similar to one that would be used if the government were leasing office space. Unfortunately, the finalized gallery could also look more like office space, depending on the nature of the bids.

According to the Heritage Minister, the proposal reflects the government's commitment of "open federalism" and the "best value for taxpayers' money." Public Works Minister Michael Fortier said that the government wants to ensure that they obtain "maximum impact from every tax dollar spent by taking advantage of private sector support and expertise."<sup>4</sup>

Comments like this underscore the degree to which Stephen Harper is committed to privatization. His government regularly uses private sector expertise as an excuse for moving forward with priorities that are clearly ideological. This is no exception. Even leaving aside the obvious issue of aesthetics, a good case can be made that devolving the National Portrait Gallery to the private sector in an undetermined Canadian city will be more expensive, but as yet there appears to be no evidence that it would be less expensive.

In a 2006 memo, Susan Peterson, the Associate Deputy Minister of Canadian Heritage, indicated that \$11 million (or about ¼ of the price tag for the original cost estimated for the Portrait Gallery) had already been spent. Additionally, Library Archives Canada indicated that an additional \$2.5 million in annual costs, or \$50 million over 25 years, would be required due to additional travel, relocation, insurance and shipping costs if the gallery were to be moved outside of Ottawa.

The only real indication of savings identified by the government that has been made public, through an Access to Information request, would only be realized by choosing a smaller gallery site.<sup>5</sup> "The only reason to put out a request for proposals is if they don't want the gallery in the nation's capital," said Terry Quinlan, an Algonquin College conservation professor. The \$50 million price tag, he noted, "would alone seem to far outweigh any potential capital contribution that might be offered by a developer in another city."<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, the Harper government had previously already flirted with the notion of a P-3 solution, but it backfired on them. EnCana, a large oil company, was prepared to offer space in the company's new Bow Tower. The space offered, however, was so expensive that it was also rejected when offered to the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. A January 18, 2007 government memo shows that the Harper government had responded

to a 2006 EnCana request for proposals “seeking cultural organizations to locate in a new complex in Calgary.”

The cost for fit-up of a 58,000 square-foot space, the size of the rejected Wellington Street location, was estimated to be \$23.8 million, not counting the transportation costs.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, the Harper government resisted the temptation to make an offer. In February 2007, the Bow Tower was sold to a Toronto-based real estate trust. Although this should have raised warning flags about the problems associated with utilizing a P-3 approach to creating a national monument, the Harper government has continued with its P-3 proposal.<sup>8</sup>

The Minister of Canadian Heritage, Josée Verner, says that, besides the cost savings, “Unlike the previous Liberal regime, which sought to draw public institutions and control to itself, the [present] government of Canada practices open federalism, not just in words but in action.” This is a curious statement from a government that early in its term also cut the Museums Assistance Program and the Exhibit Transportation Services.

The Harper government’s 2006 federal budget cut the Museums Assistance Program (MAP) by \$4.63 million, or half of the \$9 million that it has received annually since 1972. This is a far cry from the \$75 million that the Canadian Museums Associations have recommended as being required to restore Canada’s museums to where they should be.<sup>9</sup> The MAP program provides financial assistance to regional Canadian museums and galleries to help with preservation, protection, and collections management. In 2004–05 before the Harper cuts, 200 projects in all parts of Canada were funded.

Among other objectives, the program funds summer employment for students in the arts and culture sector, Aboriginal museums and cultural development, and touring exhibits of historical artifacts and contemporary art. The lack of funding means that Canadian museums in all regions and communities across Canada have had less money to work with, fewer exhibitions, and diminished ability to share Canadian history and culture with Canadians.

In particular, the cuts will reduce the educational capacity of museums and galleries. As small museums now struggle for funding, it is easy to see how they will be more dependent on the good will of the

public and on private sponsorship. It is very unclear how these funding cuts support regional cultural access, which Madame Verner says is her government's goal.

At the same time that the MAP program was cut, another equally important program that encouraged regional and community access to Canadian culture was eliminated: the Exhibit Transportation System (ETS). The ETS was a federal government program that provided exclusive shipping services to museums and art galleries in all regions of Canada. Drivers trained in art handling, operating specialized climate-controlled trucks, criss-crossed the country so that national collections, requiring special handling, could be shared with Canadians anywhere.

Over 54% of all art transportation between museums in Canada was carried out by ETS, compared to 28% of all other specialized art carriers combined. In some isolated areas, ETS was the only carrier available, given the costs of travel to those areas. Over 65% of exhibitions in the Atlantic provinces are delivered by ETS. Gallery and museum directors have estimated that their costs will rise by about 30%, although in areas like Northern Canada the costs could be much higher. Inability to afford the transportation costs for exhibitions will inevitably force their cancellation.

Although a spokesperson for the government claimed that the service had to be discontinued because the drivers weren't easily classified, this argument is outrageously weak. Nothing would have stopped the government from creating a new classification that captured the job requirements carried out by these workers.<sup>10</sup>

The Harper government's museum and arts policy seems to be held together by one core objective — privatization. But privatization will only limit the public's access to heritage and culture. The government's policies do not increase regional access, as they have argued. Instead, the Harper government is leading a "cultural devolution," purposefully putting in place complementary strategies designed to shift more and more of our cultural treasures and fine art under the control of the private sector.

Former director of the National Gallery of Canada Shirley Thomson has indicated that she is embarrassed and appalled by what is being done.<sup>11</sup> All Canadians should be equally appalled and angry as we wait

to hear which corporate brand the Harper government will determine is appropriate to stamp on our cultural heritage.