

S.H.A.M.E. *Society for History as Mandatory Education*

In response to the embarrassing results of a national Angus Reid Survey of 18-24-year-old Canadians' knowledge of their history, a group of graduate students from the Department of History at the University of Ottawa recently announced the formation of SHAME (Society for History As Mandatory Education). The students are calling on the federal government to show leadership by convening a national conference to discuss education. SHAME believes mandatory teaching standards and curriculum for History should be developed and implemented in all Canadian public schools.

The National Youth Survey was designed by the Dominion Institute, a non-profit promoter of Canadian history, civic identity, and national values. The survey clearly shows that young Canadians, the vast majority of whom have recently graduated from 12 years of public education know little or nothing about their nation's past. Members of the Society were dismayed by the results of the Dominion Institute's poll, which concluded that the overwhelming majority of Canadian youth were egregiously ignorant of fundamental events which shaped Canada's past and present. The poll tested the knowledge of 1,104 young Canadians, and the overall results noted an average score of 34 per cent, signifying 10 correct answers out of 30 questions. The poll results clearly demonstrated a striking lack of basic knowledge on the part of young Canadians concerning the historic development of their country, and its place in the world. For instance, only 54 per cent of those tested were able to name Sir John A. Macdonald as Canada's first Prime Minister, 64 per cent didn't know when Confederation occurred (half of these respondents guessed the wrong century!), and 30 per cent thought that Norman Rockwell was a Canadian. "The results were truly shameful," said one SHAME member ruefully, "hence the name." Society members believe that this lack of historical understanding and knowledge casts recent events in an entirely new light. The lowest-indecades voter turnout for the last federal election and the growing political regionalization of the country both represent a fundamental lack of national historical memory and consciousness among Canadians. "The meaning and utility of history is much more than a dry recounting of names, dates, and facts," noted SHAME member Sean Foyn. "History is a multi-dimensional craft in which the arts of storytelling and writing meet with the sciences of research and analysis. When taught to seek out, explain, or critique themes and patterns in our past, students will possess a powerful intellectual tool that will allow them to bore deep into the physical and ideological core of a nation." There is a general consensus among SHAME members that by not assuming responsibility for their own history, Canadians have allowed questions about their past to become divisive tools rather than a mobilizing force to galvanize the country in the face of the unity crisis. Another SHAME member noted that "four provinces require students to take just one high school history course to graduate while four other provinces require no history at all."

SHAME members said that very little emphasis is put on Canadian history and what there is tends to be region and language-specific. While historical facts are incontrovertible, interpretation and bias may often lead to a skewed and self-serving vision of the past. "History is dotted with regimes, governments, and dictators who have successfully harnessed the power of the past for their own purposes," observed SHAME's Jennifer Dunn. "The astonishing ignorance displayed by young Canadians concerning their country's past should be seen as a warning sign. If nothing is done to correct the situation and instill in Canadians a sense of awareness about their past, then the country's future risks being hijacked and derailed by the highwaymen of the present." SHAME's Brian Begbie remarked, "History, for better or for worse, is one of the few remaining things that all Canadians truly share and can call their own. Some may try to deny Canadians their birthright by, for instance, polarizing the unity debate. However, the multi-faceted and inclusive nature of good history, which strives for objectivity, can serve as an effective remedy to combat the malaise which now grips the country and its past."

SHAME members maintain that while education is a provincial area of jurisdiction, only national leadership will motivate the provinces to take action. "The poll clearly illustrates why there are national unity problems. How can people be expected to make decisions on Canada's future when they don't even know about their past?" asked one member. While SHAME is currently gearing up for the school year, there has already been significant national interest in the organization. An on-line posting concerning SHAME produced a sizable response from across the country, with support being offered by institutions and individuals from British Columbia to Newfoundland. Professor Eric Sager of the University of Victoria's History Department wrote that SHAME was "a great idea" and that he was happy to offer his assistance in what Jason Churchill of Newfoundland called "a worthy and timely endeavor." SHAME has been building support across Canada this fall. In the meantime, it will be preparing a questionnaire to every member of parliament. The document will ask MPs to declare if they support mandatory teaching of Canadian history as a pre-requisite for graduating from high school. Following this, the questionnaire will be sent to all provincial and territorial legislatures. An Internet website is also in the works, as well as other measures designed to raise the profile of history on the education agenda.

Theo Colombo

For more information contact: Theodore Colombo, Sean Foyn, Jennifer Dunn, Brian Begbie, Department of History, University of Ottawa, 155 Seraphin Marion, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5.

Published in *Ottawa Life*, October 1997.
Reprinted by permission.