

Museums deserve to be taken care of

WE CANADIANS OFTEN CRITICIZE OURSELVES, saying that we don't have a strong enough national identity or a properly developed sense of who we are and where we come from as a society. And the only way to remedy those problems—and they are problems—is to put Canadian culture and history on display.

Museums play a vital role in any society, preserving and promoting some of its most important artifacts, stories, and pieces of art. Unfortunately, the federal government hasn't been doing its job to support Canadian museums—that much is obvious from the way they've treated the long-awaited National Portrait Gallery.

For years, we've been promised a national portrait gallery as somewhere to exhibit to the public the more than 20 000 portraits, drawings, and prints the government has amassed and which are now being held in a climate-controlled warehouse, hidden from view. In 2000, Chrétien's Liberals announced that a permanent home would finally be made for these pieces of art in the former US embassy building across from the Parliament buildings. Construction on the project had been slow and unexpectedly expensive since the beginning, and in June, Prime Minister Harper stopped renovations on the site, starting instead to look at moving the whole gallery to the EnCana Centre in Calgary. But that fell through too, and the fate of the gallery has been a mystery ever since.

That is, until last week, when federal Heritage Minister Josée Verner revealed the government's new plan. They're going to let cities with a population of over 350 000—Ottawa, Halifax, Quebec City, Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal—compete for the opportunity to host it, with the prize going to the highest bidder.

While it's a good idea in theory to have national heritage institutions like the Portrait Gallery in places other than just the capital, the government's latest plan is merely an attempt to conceal their continued lack of leadership on museum and archive policy.

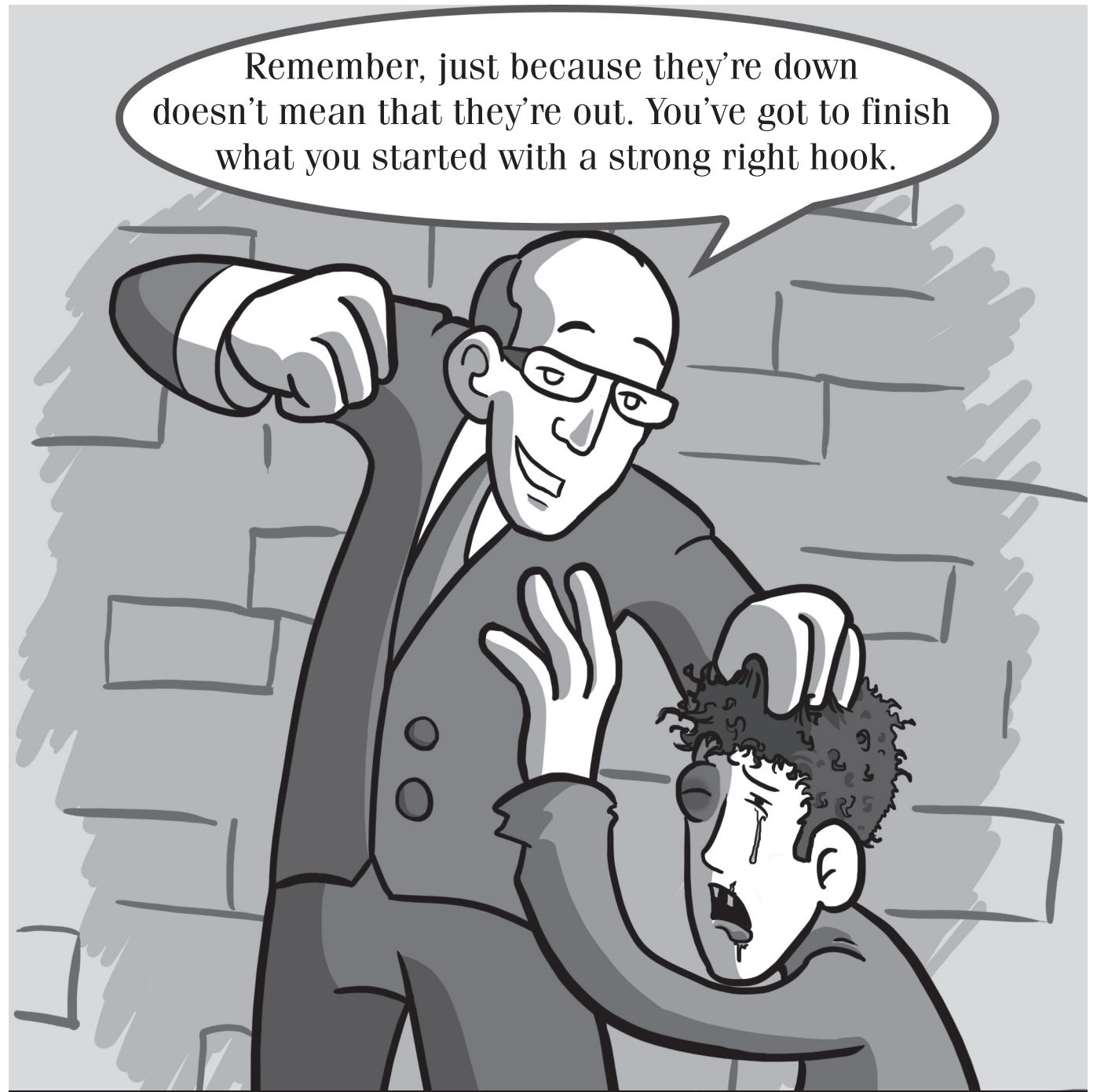
They failed to abide by a campaign promise to create a much-needed comprehensive museums policy, and then almost halved funding for the Museums Assistance Program last fall. Meanwhile, Harper has been pushing for—and funding—a national Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg. These actions have done nothing but send mixed messages, which have done no one any good. Without a comprehensive policy, museums, galleries, and archives have a hard time preparing for the future because they don't know if or how Harper's next whim might affect them.

But perhaps the most troubling part of the new Portrait Gallery plan is the intention that it would be a partnership between government and industry. I'm all for saving taxpayers' money, but I have a serious problem with relying on private industry to develop and maintain important cultural projects. The private sector has no business in the preservation of our cultural heritage, because preserving our cultural heritage is not a business. The problem with having the Telus Portrait Gallery of Canada or the Syncrude Museum of Natural History is that if business interests are involved, the point of the institution becomes turning a profit. Instead, they should keep research, preservation, and education as their main goals, not the bottom line.

Sure, a museum needs money to carry out this mission, but to do so at the sake of accessibility and unbiased research is completely missing the point. Museums should be a place of learning, both for academics and the general public. If private industry gets involved, we run the risk that they'll only display "blockbuster" exhibits and downplay the importance of research, and that citizens—the true stakeholders of the history and culture within—will only be seen as customers.

Public archives, museums and galleries hold our country's roots in their vaults and displays, but without proper support they won't be able to complete their mission of education and preservation. If that happens, all present and future Canadians lose out.

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor



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CONAL PIERSE

LETTERS

White poppy a symbol of misguided protest

In response to Graham Lettner's piece "White poppy honours dead without glamourizing war" (8 November), I would challenge Mr Lettner to explain how it is exactly that the red poppy glamourizes war. The red poppy isn't a symbol of the greatness of war, violence, or bloodshed.

It is, as the name of the day implies, a symbol of remembrance and a celebration of the life and the freedom that Canadians now enjoy. Take a minute and think about who you have to thank for that. I would challenge you, Mr Lettner, to visit the war memorial in Ottawa, take a peek at the encyclopedia-sized books filled with the names of the men and women who have died fighting for our country, and tell me how glamorous it is.

Wearing a white poppy is unnecessary and insulting. If you want to make known your insightful views on world affairs that war is bad and that people die, then perhaps you should come up with a new gimmick. I've always thought that a white dove is a nice symbol of peace. You could wear it on 21 September, which is the International Day of Peace.

Don't hijack and politicize what is supposed to be a sombre day of remembrance. By wearing a

homemade white poppy, you're not making any meaningful statement. You're only feeding your own misguided sense of moral superiority. Show some respect, and proudly wear a red poppy each Remembrance Day.

CLAIRE DEACON
Arts III

Don't be so quick to forget soldiers' sacrifices

Remembrance Day is a day we set aside to remember those who died in war; a day to think about the sacrifice of the men and women who left everything behind to protect the rights and freedoms we all hold so dear. The poppy is a visual reminder of the true cost of war and is a distinct allusion to the red poppies in Flanders Fields, the dead soldiers buried there, and their fear that they'll be forgotten.

Unfortunately, some people have been using the dead to prop up their political agenda and have been promoting the wearing of white poppies. They say the white poppy represents peace and the end to all war; I tell you, no one yearns for peace more than the soldier who has waded through the blood of his comrades and allies. The red poppy does not glorify war; it reminds us of the very real, very horrible consequences of violent conflict.

The Peace Pledge Union says the white poppies honour those who

have fallen in war, but at the same time, they attack them for having taken up arms in the first place. Fighting Hitler was wrong, they say. Those who died deserved it for being involved in war, and those who didn't are guilty of crimes against humanity.

The very idea of honouring soldiers is anathema to the people who produce and sell the white poppy. The white poppy is nothing more than a way for an attention-seeking group to get some time under the media spotlight to highlight their political agenda. I can think of 364 really good reasons not to wear a white poppy on Remembrance Day.

The end to war is a noble cause to stand for and one that I sympathize with. Just don't do it by spitting in the face, or on the grave, of those who fought for just that.

OCDT COLEMAN ROOKSBY
Arts III

Let people remember in whatever way they like

The Royal Canadian Legion states that the red poppy is the international symbol of remembrance. Any further conclusions one may draw about what the red poppy symbolizes would be a pointless exercise. I fail to see how remembering isn't a part of one's values; one can still be opposed to war and participate in remembrance with a red poppy.

Whether you remember with a red poppy, or a white one, or a brown one for whatever reason, the fact is that you're remembering, and getting finicky about which colour poppy best reflects your style or tastes best is trivial.

Whether you're remembering in an anti-war, anti-cancer, anti-poverty, anti-AIDs, or any other context you may choose, people are still entitled to [their] own opinions while participating in remembering, whether you opt for a traditional red poppy or not (if they even choose to wear a poppy in the first place).

It's presumptuous to believe that someone is subscribing to a particular doctrine based on their choice of poppy colour.

ROBERT SUTHERLAND
Via Email

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