

Why Black History Month?

By Tony Pearson

This month marks the 20th anniversary of the declaration by the Canadian Parliament of Black History Month. Some people wonder why a particular group is singled out for special focus in the school curriculum.

There are a number of answers. One is that in a diverse society, people need to know about the achievements of non-mainstream groups to our country. Another is that for decades in Ontario, Canadian history was taught as a sub-set of English history, and that it was high time to wake up to the fact that Canada has benefitted from contributions from many ethnic groups (including black, Asian and native), not just those with origins in the British Isles.

(For the record, a black official named Mathieu de Costa accompanied Samuel de Champlain as a translator during the founding of New France. And up to 10 per cent of United Empire Loyalists – the founders of English Canada – were Black.)

However, I believe that Black History Month can serve another purpose: that of stripping away some of the smugness that often accompanies the celebration of Canadian heritage.

When I attended elementary and secondary school (just after the end of the last Ice Age), the curriculum covered only one element of the black experience in Canada – the Underground Railway.

We learned how Canadians were superior to Americans in our treatment of escaped slaves. What we didn't learn was how badly treated non-white people were once they got here.

For example, we didn't learn that shortly after they arrived in Nova Scotia, black Loyalists were attacked by hundreds of white Loyalists who feared competition for jobs.

Or the time in 1910 when a number of black farm families from Oklahoma, attempting to flee growing racism in the U.S., tried to take advantage of the offer of free land for immigrants to the Prairies.

In reply, the Canadian government passed an order-in-council prohibiting – any immigrant of the Negro race, whose race is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada.

It wasn't just blacks who faced official discrimination.

The Canadian government, responding to race riots in Vancouver, refused to let legal immigrants from India get off their ship.

Chinese immigrants, brought over to build our railroads, were forced to pay a special – head tax – if they wanted to stay.

New immigration was blocked; in 1923 another order-in-council barred – any immigrant of any Asiatic race – (including the Middle East) except for farm labourers or domestic servants. And of course, in the Second World War, thousands of blameless Japanese Canadians were sent to prison camps and had all their property taken from them without compensation.

As late as 1947, the prime minister (Mackenzie King – the guy on the \$50 bill) declared that – Large-scale immigration from the Orient would change the fundamental composition of the Canadian population, – and so allowed an official policy of discrimination. This was re-confirmed in 1953, when the Immigration Act explicitly allowed rejection by nationality, ethnic group, geographical area of origin, or by reason of – peculiar customs, habits and modes of life, unsuitability with regard to the climate, or probable inability to become readily assimilated.

Then there's our historic mistreatment of our indigenous peoples. But that too was soft-peddled in the history books, until recently. The point is that we need to be regularly reminded that we don't have a spotless record when it comes to our treatment of minority groups.

We have no justification for any – holier-than-thou – attitudes when it comes to comparing histories of racism and discrimination.

In the 1970s, Canada finally declared itself a multicultural society, and started to make strides toward this goal. In the early 1980s, we finally passed a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, outlawing discrimination.

We also grew. In 1951, our population was about 14 million. Today, it's more than double that – more than 35 million. Most of this growth was from immigration and the children of immigrants. It is projected that in another 15 years, nearly half our population will be either foreign-born or have at least one foreign-born parent.

As for diversity, about one in five Canadians today is from a – visible minority – group – nearly one in four, if you count aboriginal peoples.

So it's important to recognize the multicultural Canada that exists today, with contributions from a variety of different groups.

It's important that young people in regions that are still mainly – old stock – learn that there is a wider Canada out there, and that the many threads that make up our nation each have their own stories: stories of overcoming obstacles and dealing with discrimination to become contributors to our country – just like other pioneers

So there is a point to having Black History Month as part of the school curriculum, even in areas where the visible minority presence is a very small minority.

It is equally important to have Native or Aboriginal history and culture on the curriculum. And it is important that in teaching Canadian history, we face squarely the racist elements in our past.

If we do, then perhaps we won't repeat the mistakes of our grandparents.