Les liaisons dangereuses ou les relations troubles entre le politique et les musées canadiens

Dangerous Liaisons: Disquieting affairs between the two worlds of politics and Canadian museums

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Abstract

While museums frequently describe cultural democracy as the driving force for change and development, an increasing number of cases are raising doubts as to whether Canadian museums today in fact enjoy the freedom of operation they need to have a real impact on the development of cultural democracy. After a brief overview of this concept, the article then examines how the current situation of museums in Canada and the positions adopted by the federal government are subverting the very foundations of cultural democracy. Using recent examples, this article shows how the Conservative government has, over the past several years, stepped up its efforts to control the messages conveyed by exhibitions, using a range of tactics that include political intervention and budget cutbacks aimed at weakening the scientific underpinnings and conservation mission fundamental to museums. Actions of this kind inevitably create a climate of tension that leads to practices of self-censorship and ultimately to the restructuring of the missions of public museums.

Keywords: national museums; Parcs Canada; cultural democracy; politics

In rather the same way as sustainable development or multiculturalism, cultural democracy has come to be seen as a virtue, in the primary sense of the word (“a moral quality…”, according to the OED online). The concept has now simply become an oft-repeated catch-all for describing the cultural policies of governments. Who today would dare question this fundamental principle that, in many ways, now passes for conventional wisdom in the museum world?

Somewhat ironically, while museums habitually describe cultural democracy as being a driving force for change and development, an increasing number of examples are raising doubts as to whether Canadian museums today in fact enjoy the freedom of operation they need to have a direct impact on the development of cultural democracy. The situation in Canada provides some eloquent examples of the fragile balance between museums and political power. We need only think back to the severe budget cuts made to culture and the Canadian museum system by the Conservative government after 2008, or remind ourselves of Imperial Oil’s involvement in the content of Ottawa’s Canada Science and Technology Museum (CSTM) exhibit, Energy: Power to Choose (2001), or the cutbacks in research positions at Parks Canada in 2012. Then there is the change in vocation of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) which Steven Harper’s government has decided should become instead the Canadian Museum of History (CMH), so it can play a key role in fulfilling the government’s view of Canadian identity. All these recent events – unprecedented in the history of Canadian museums – may not simply...
be a matter of chance. Looming behind the changes, there seems to be an agenda targeting issues of fundamental importance for the future of museums. This being said, we should probably be reflecting more seriously on the role and place of research as a driving force for knowledge and cultural democracy in the museum field.

**UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE AND THE NEW MUSEOLOGY**

Cultural democracy is one of the fundamental values governments invoke when establishing public policy programs (Bellavance 2000). Particularly in the decades of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, it served as a significant guiding principle for orientations adopted by many museums, while leading to major changes whose after-effects are still being felt by those very same museums today. The decades that followed the adoption of the resolution of the *Round Table on the Development and the Role of Museums in the Contemporary World* in Santiago, Chile in 1972 illustrate the efforts made to turn museums into places for reflection and change that contribute to public engagement. Along with a substantial increase in the number of theme-based exhibitions and travelling exhibitions over the same period came an increase in the number of visitors; museum attendance figures rose significantly in those same years. While many analysts interpreted this phenomenon as being a direct result of the “new museology” (Desvallées 1992), it is important to remind ourselves that the increase in the number of museum visitors was also occurring at a key moment when access to postsecondary education was becoming available to greater numbers of people in industrialized countries. Clearly, the 1970s ushered in a new era favourable to the development of museum networks and the possibility of increased access to museums by people from all walks of life. But efforts to attract segments of the population not usually interested in visiting museums have not generally produced the desired results, apart from school groups, which might best be described as captive audiences. While the most well-off members of society continue to visit museums, it is the middle-class group that is generating the increase in visitor numbers, due to its members’ rapid access to higher education. At the same time, by their use of learning programs that have students draw on museum resources, both elementary and secondary levels of the education system are contributing to a rise in museum access by students from all levels of society. As a result, museums are making increasing efforts to cultivate a cultural democracy perspective by focusing on museum education programs and developing cultural action strategies designed for all kinds of publics (Hooper-Greenhill 2007).

This major transition period also brought its share of challenges to the roles historically played by museums. Previously ignored minority groups claimed their right to be recognized in museums and the necessary freedom to interpret their own history and culture. This is particularly true for different indigenous peoples who have also claimed rights to collections of indigenous artifacts in public museums. Among the most powerful examples were the 1989 challenges sparked by the *When the Spirit Sings* exhibition funded by Shell and presented at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary (Archibald 1995). Indigenous communities challenged the perpetuation by the Museum of stereotypical images of First Nations and Inuit peoples as “Noble Savages”, with no recognition of the problems they face in today’s society (Price 2011). These protests eventually led to the creation of the *Round Table of the Canadian Museums Association* which brought together representatives of the indigenous peoples of Canada to discuss how best to develop a new museology that would better reflect the expectations of the country’s First Peoples; they were also a major factor in the establishment of the Erasmus-Dussault Royal Commission on indigenous peoples where First Nations heritage issues were a central consideration (Arsenault, personal communication).

In response to the values underlying the new museology, museums are undergoing profound changes. Instead of simply giving people access to permanent collections, they regularly organize thematic exhibitions on topics of interest to the public. Museums are no longer solely places for the conservation and contemplation of artefacts; they themselves have become “cultural scenes” in the broadest sense of the expression. The orientations of the *Musée de la civilisation*, opened in Québec City by the
Government of Québec in 1988, are fully in keeping with the spirit of the new museology and the museum has come to be seen as an archetypical example of the movement (Arpin 1997). The concept of and approach adopted for the Musée de la civilisation have also been an inspiration for museums in other parts of the world, including the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, the House of European History in Brussels, the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations in Marseille, and the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Cairo.

THE NEW WAVE OF ECONOMIC LIBERALISM

The thematic exhibitions mounted as part of the new museology attracted new visitors who tended to return increasingly frequently, thereby generating an accompanying increase in revenues from museum entrance fees. Over the same period, other factors were also leading to changes in the museum world. Capital costs were rising and the production of exhibitions was demanding increasingly heavy investment. Museums were left with no alternative but to increase their revenues. Unfortunately, this choice rooted in a desire for cultural democracy seems have converted in no small time to the ideology of neoliberalism. This happened when market forces came into play and museums underwent transformations designed to help them better respond to the requirements of the culture industry, including the creation of communications and marketing services to help them increase visitor attendance and so ensure higher revenues (Mairesse 2005). Museums began producing blockbuster exhibitions as a way to attract broader audiences, so transforming them into mass media, a process that at the same time began to reveal the first cracks in the walls of their cultural projects. If collections were the bedrock on which museum activities long remained anchored, today’s pursuit by museums of new publics and revenues has inevitably driven them to focus primarily on exhibitions, public events and marketplace economy.

While museologists tended to vacillate on the new developments taking shape in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, museums found themselves committed to a course from which there could be no retreat. Pressures from governments meant they had no alternative but to increase the number of temporary exhibitions they presented if they were to generate the revenues needed to cover costs incurred for their outreach activities. Faced with substantial increases in production costs, they discovered the advantages of working together to make their investments more cost-effective through the presentation of temporary and travelling exhibits (Clair 2007). The result was an erosion of the original vocation of museums, that of collecting together works of art and artefacts, in their role as reflections of cultural history, constituting a wealth of heritage resources that could then be drawn on for exhibitions, educational programs, cultural activities and, as of the 1990s, virtual exhibits. In a nutshell, the focus of museums was no longer on their collections and on heritage conservation, but instead on their number of visitors.

A COUNTER-REVOLUTION IN CULTURAL DEMOCRACY: FROM NEOLIBERALISM TO NEOCONSERVATISM

If neoliberalism, in reducing culture to its economic function, caused museums to move away from their original vocation of focusing primarily on the development of collections and the promotion of heritage, it should nevertheless be recognized that neoliberalism also contributed significantly to the dissemination of knowledge. Never in the history of museums had there been so much reflection on the social role of this institution or so much literature published on the topic.

In recent years, a different kind of shock wave has struck deep at the core of what museums are all about. Undeniably, it is now predominantly neoconservative values that are driving sweeping transformations in Canadian museums. In this context, certain museums are clearly more than ready to buy into the
Conservative ideology, instead of holding to their traditional role of defending cultural democracy. At least, this is what recent Canadian examples seem to illustrate all too well.

There was some considerable debate in Canada when the Harper government decided to celebrate one particularly long-overlooked historic event. The commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain arose from the Conservatives’ conviction of the need for the creation of a new myth about the founding of Canada, a myth according to which this war represented a defining moment in the nation’s history. Incidentally, it is well worth re-examining the book by John Murdoch Harper published in 1913 to celebrate *The Century of Peace*; it seems to be the source of the arguments adopted by the government one century later. In fact, on the government website created for the occasion in 2013, the official messages begin with a text under the signature of Prime Minister Harper and based on this very same book:

> The War of 1812 was a seminal event in the making of our great country. On the occasion of its 200th anniversary, I invite all Canadians to share in our history and commemorate our proud and brave ancestors who fought and won against enormous odds. … a war that saw Aboriginal peoples, local and volunteer militias, and English and French-speaking regiments fight together to save Canada from American invasion.

> The War helped establish our path toward becoming an independent and free country, united under the Crown, with a respect for linguistic and ethnic diversity. The heroic efforts of Canadians then helped define who we are today, what side of the border we live on, and which flag we salute. (Harper 2012)

The celebration of the War of 1812 illustrates the political compulsion on the part of the Conservative government to impose an ideological view of history by changing the date of the founding of Canada from the year of Confederation in 1867 to the year 1812 – when Canada was still a British colony with no unifying political structure. In their collective publication *Canada’s Founding Debates*, historians Janet Ajzenstat, Paul Romney, Ian Gentles and William D. Gairdner make no reference at all to the war of 1812 as being a pivotal moment in the making of the Canadian identity. In fact, as historian Jocelyn Létourneau (2012) observes in “Reshaping Canadian Identity?” (our translation):

> Much has been said about the Harper government’s decision to restore certain symbols of the monarchy and to tie them anew to the emblematic figure of Canada. Its decision to transform the War of 1812 into a decisive event in the creation of the country has also been contested. In Québec, as well as the rest of Canada, many pundits are resisting what they have called a step backward in the production of national symbols and a hijacking of the past for political purposes in the present. (Globe and Mail translation, published July 01, 2013)

Létourneau argues that the explanation probably lies in the Harper government’s conclusion that a new identity paradigm is needed to compensate for the flaws in the existing concept of multiculturalism.

Historians and media commentators alike (Boileau 2012) questioned the deliberate appropriation of this commemoration strategy to support a party platform. And what should not be forgotten is that the Conservative Party also called upon the contribution to this strategy of a significant number of Canadian institutions, including Heritage Canada, National Defence, Parks Canada, Library and Archives Canada, Canada Post and the Canadian War Museum. The mobilisation of these institutions was designed, as the then Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, James Moore, wrote, “to let people hear the stories of Canadian heroes that illustrate our past and our values. Not least among those heroes were Sir Isaac Brock, Tecumseh, Charles-Michel de Salaberry and Laura Secord, all of whom played a part in defending the country during the conflict” (Moore 2012).
In the spring of 2012, in spite of the fact that the Parks Canada network of historic sites had also been called upon to participate in the commemoration operation, the Prime Minister announced the government’s decision to make drastic cuts to its funding of Parks Canada. A network that had previously earned international acclaim for the high quality of its research and heritage mediation expertise is today a pale reflection of its former self. The agency cut its 3,000-person workforce by 20 percent in 2012. Parks Canada management tried to play down the impact of these cuts by arguing that “the cutbacks are for the most part being made in areas where staff do not have direct contact with the public. We want to improve internal efficiencies by putting more focus on the needs of our visitors and concentrating staff and services in places receiving the greatest number of visits” (Stab 2012, our translation). In plain terms, the bottom line message was that the job cuts would be made to research positions, the very positions that compile and verify historical information. Like a number of other organizations, the Association of sciences communicators / Association des communicateurs scientifiques du Québec criticised these cutbacks as being prejudicial to society’s collective memory: “In total, only 20 of the agency’s 72 archeologists and curators across the country, will remain. And in many cases, audio guides or iPad applications will be the tools used to replace real flesh and blood people” (Levée 2013, our translation). The Government of Québec and Québec archeologists also protested (Mathieu 2013) against the decision to move archeological collections previously held in Québec City to the city of Gatineau, making it more difficult for researchers to access them.

TWO EMBLEMATIC EXHIBITIONS

The strategy for commemorating the War of 1812 was a harbinger of major changes to come in heritage mediation. This was paralleled by a consonant increase in government intervention in the content of museum exhibitions. Two telling examples exemplify the positions taken by the Conservative Government.

After producing *Sex: A Tell-all Exhibition* (2012-2013), the Montréal Science Centre proposed this exhibition to other museums. In 2012, the CSTM decided to present the exhibition in Ottawa. Only shortly before it was due to open, with emotions already running high, James Moore, then Minister of Canadian Heritage, intervened, claiming that the exhibition was “an insult to taxpayers” (Mercier 2012). Radio-Canada revealed that complaints had come from religious groups, even before the exhibition opened its doors. Journalist Brigitte Bureau identified the sources of the complaints as being the following groups: the Catholic League for Human Rights, the Institute of Marriage and Family, the Ottawa Home Schooling Association, Canada Family Action and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (Bureau 2012a). Bureau also noted that “among the opponents to the exhibition was the evangelical group, Christian Governance” (Bureau 2012a), whose website is managed by Timothy Bloedow, assistant to Maurice Vellacott, the Conservative member of parliament from Saskatoon.

In spite of the fact that the exhibition had been produced under the supervision of a scientific committee “comprised of physicians, public health experts, educational sciences experts and sexologists, established to validate exhibit content and presentation”, and in close collaboration with a “group of teenagers, known as the ‘science cells’, who provided feedback comments on different versions of the scenario” (Moore 2012), the Minister’s office insisted that the minimum age limit for entry to the exhibition be raised from 12 to 16. Relations between the museum and the Minister’s office were apparently highly strained, with a spokesperson for James Moore making a point of specifying that “funding to the CSTM ‘will not be affected’ by the presentation of this exhibition” (Gariépy cited in Mercier 2012, our translation). The science journalist, Brique Pauchet, in an article on the 2012 conference of the Association francophone pour le savoir (ACFAS), wrote that “both Michel Groulx (head of research and content at the Montréal Science Centre) and Pierre Noreau, President of ACFAS, are concerned about this kind of political interference in citizens’ rights to be informed and have access to culture” (Pauchet 2013, our translation).
Particularly disturbing in this case was the fact that complaints made by about fifty people who disagreed with choices made for certain themes presented led the CSTM to censor access to an exhibition that had not even provoked controversy in Montréal and Regina, the other two cities where it had taken place. It is a somewhat rare occurrence for a Minister of the Government to succumb to public pressure and intervene with museum authorities. This case is especially revealing in its illustration of the ongoing close relationships that exist between museums and the political system. The newer phenomenon is the stated intent of political players to intervene in the management of museums.

In an exhibition with the doubly appropriate title, *Energy: Power to Choose*, the CSTM partnered with Imperial Oil which donated $600,000 for the project. In Canada, the practice of associating with donor partners has always been encouraged by the state, itself the primary source of museum funding.

From the very outset, the museum established an advisory committee composed of scientists, environmentalists and industry representatives. Using the *Access to Information Act* to document the project, Radio-Canada discovered that the Imperial Oil representative on the committee, Susan Swan, the oil company’s Public Affairs Director, was also the chair of the museum’s advisory committee.

It may strike some observers as curious that the museum chose to combine members of the scientific advisory group and industry representatives on the same committee. From an ethical standpoint, museums are wise to maintain a reasonable distance from people whose interests lie in influencing choices relating to the content of exhibitions; they should never allow themselves to forget that, even when private companies help to fund particular exhibition projects, national museums are above all state-funded public institutions. When such public institutions fail to maintain an appropriate distance between themselves and their private partners, suspicions can arise as to their real degree of independence and impartiality. In this particular case, what was bound to happen did indeed happen. Certain of the positions proposed by the scientists and the environmental groups apparently conflicted with positions held by the oil lobby. Radio-Canada journalist, Brigitte Bureau, produced concrete evidence to show that Susan Swann was able to have changes made to content in the exhibition, to the advantage of the oil companies. She quotes from her sources:

> She asked for example for the exhibit to say that the oil sands industry recycles between 80% and 95% of the water it uses. Which is far from the truth, argue certain environmentalists. … She asked that the display state that only one tenth of 1% of the world production of greenhouse gases is the result of oil sands extraction in Canada. She also suggested that the exhibit should point out that oil sands development would inject more than 1.7 trillion dollars into the Canadian economy over the coming 25 years. (Bureau 2012b)

The recommendations made by Imperial Oil, as well as two letters sent to the museum by Ms. Swan, can be found on the Radio-Canada website (Bureau 2012b). The museum, bombarded with volleys of questions, denied having given in to pressures from its funding partner. Even so, it appears to have been more sensitive to the arguments put forward by Imperial Oil than to those of the scientific experts. Museums, driven toward a new form of liberalism and obliged to seek the support of private partners, all too often find themselves bordering on conflict of interest. In this particular case, people might justifiably wonder if Imperial Oil’s representative on the committee was perhaps supported by the Conservative Party, which openly promotes the exploitation of fossil fuels, thereby putting the museum in a potentially compromising position.

Even more surprising is the fact that verifiable content of items in the exhibition was not subjected to any critical and objective review. For the public to be confident that they are seeing the result of efforts to achieve transparency and rationality on contentious issues, do museums not have a responsibility to be objective, or at the very least, to provide visitors with a range of points of view that expose them to
neutral and objective explanations about topics and make them more aware of all the crucial elements? This at least is how visitors see museums: as places of truth and authenticity. Would it not be reasonable to expect that museums of sciences, perhaps even more than other types of museums, need to be objective?

In spite of the controversy surrounding this exhibition, the Canadian Museums Association, which awards prizes to celebrate and promote excellence in the Canadian museum sector, still chose to bestow an honorable mention to *Energy: Power to Choose*. What are we to understand when a highly controversial exhibition that raised significant ethical concerns is acclaimed as an example?

In contrast to the exhibition on the subject of sex, where moral values prompted the minister to react, in this other case, neither the minister, the government nor the Canadian Museums Association seem to have felt any need to express concerns about the importance of defending the principle of research ethics. In each of these cases, can it honestly be said that the actions of the museum were consistent with the spirit of cultural democracy? To properly understand this particular context, people need to understand that within the walls of museums there exists a kind of conspiracy of silence that leads inevitably to self-censorship. When national museums depend on the state for their existence, and when private museums are funded in part by governments, who would conceivably dare to raise questions like this? The truth is that museums are in the vulnerable position of being dependent on governments, so need to find ways to live with the positions taken by those same governments.

**REWIRITING HISTORY**

A final example I consider symptomatic of current neoconservative ideology is the change of the name of the former Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) to Canadian Museum of History (CMH). But while on the surface, this seems to be just a simple change of designation, the reality is rather more complex. James Moore, the Minister of Canadian Heritage, announced on October 16, 2012 that the CMC would become the Canadian Museum of History, and that “the storyline” for the museum, its mandate, would change. He noted that its programming would aim to “enhance Canadians’ knowledge, understanding and appreciation of events, experiences, people and objects that reflect and have shaped Canada’s history and identity, rather than on anthropology and different civilizations.” At his press conference, the minister stressed the connections to be drawn between this project and the 2017 celebrations:

> The United States has the Smithsonian. Germany has the German History Museum. There are examples all over the world of major countries with major museums that celebrate their national history.

> We have the opportunity to do that in Canada, particularly as you think about how we’re going towards our 150th birthday in 2017, and a lot of local museums across the country are developing great narratives and local ideas about how they want to tell their local story for Canada’s 150th birthday. (Moore 2012)

This announcement did not go unnoticed. Historians and politicians alike spoke out to denounce the Harper government’s determination to rewrite Canadian history and to use the country’s most prestigious museum to its own ends (Létourneau 2012; Morin 2012).

Although the decision provoked widespread criticism, it should be remembered that national museums are creatures of the state and that the state can adopt legislation to define their mandate. As such, a government has every right to adopt new legislation to redefine a museum’s mission. Over the years, the Canadian government has several times changed the name and role of the CMC, originally established as a geological museum by the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) in 1856. At the beginning of the
20th century, the GSC Museum was officially integrated with a government division of ethnology and anthropology (1907) and became the National Museum of Canada, and later, in 1969, the National Museum of Man, before its name was changed once again in 1986. The choice of the name Canadian Museum of Civilization seems to have been made in response to the establishment of the Musée de la civilisation (Québec City) by the Government of Québec of the time. It is especially important that we not forget that the concept of the CMC was strongly influenced by the views of the philosopher and sociologist, Marshall McLuhan, and his vision of the “Global Village” (MacDonald and Stephen 1989) to which the Canadian Prime Minister of the time, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, was particularly receptive. All things considered, the current situation is far from being a precedent, since the museum was originally established around scientific collections and it was the addition of ethnographic collections that led to its first becoming a museum of anthropology and later a museum centered on humans and their worlds.

In Bill C-49, an Act to amend the Museums Act, the Government states:

The amendment changes the purpose of the museum in several ways. First, it changes the target for the museum’s endeavours from “throughout Canada and internationally” to “Canadians.” Second, it changes the museum’s purpose from increasing “interest in, knowledge and critical understanding of and appreciation and respect for human cultural achievements and human behaviour” to enhancing “knowledge, understanding and appreciation of events, experiences, people and objects that reflect and have shaped Canada’s history and identity, and also to enhance their awareness of world history and cultures.” Third, it deletes any reference to the ways in which the museum carries out its purpose.8

What seems to be a new development with the proposed change in focus to turn the CMC into a museum of history is how the concept falls back to a discipline-based position. Whereas museums of anthropology and civilisation draw on a range of disciplines to address a particular subject, museums of history more often tend to draw on only one discipline and favour one particular message. The CEO of the Museum, Mark O’Neill, expressed it in these terms:

The Canadian Museum of History will present the national narrative of the history of Canada and its people. With a renewed focus on the connections between past and present in the shaping of Canada and Canadians, the Museum will explore the major themes and seminal events and people of our national experience by bringing history to life and providing the public with a strong sense of Canadian identity. (O’Neill, n.d.)

The position expressed by Mr. O’Neill is entirely consonant with a long tradition in national museums whose mission is to create a common sense of identity among citizens.

The very same day that this name change was announced, Hélène Buzzetti (2012) commented in Le Devoir:

As was announced [on Tuesday] by James Moore, the Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, it will from now on be known as the Canadian Museum of History. Such a change might initially seem rather innocuous. However, the situation needs to be understood in the context of a broader movement in which a truth-claiming discourse is manipulated and constructed, and the subjugation of science to political ideology becomes the norm. (our translation)

If we go back into the historical archives, we discover similar comments when the government announced that the Museum of Man was to be replaced by the new approach for the CMC. In short, any transformation of a major national institution will always arouse resistance and concern; the
intelligentsia know only too well that museums can influence public perceptions and that changes in designation will engender a new rhetoric of national identity. Nation-building is far from being a novel concept and the projected transformation of the CMC is simply another illustration of the doctrine. And with time, one could quite reasonably imagine a new generation of politicians calling in turn for new changes to the CMC.

Wanting to establish a museum of history along the lines of the National Museum of American History is a perfectly justifiable political choice for our Conservative Government. At the same time, the transformation of the CMC represents the loss of a major institution designed to open windows on the world – a role very different from that of a museum of history. And this is the very essence of the issue around which the Conservatives’ decision should be challenged. Furthermore, it is extremely important today to recognize that the CMC is one of several museums in Canada that have successfully revitalized the museum scene and brought new publics to their exhibitions, programs and activities. In this regard, the CMC achieved the goals outlined by the museum’s first Director, George F. MacDonald, in *A Museum for the Global Village: The Canadian Museum of Civilization*.

After an interview I gave to *Le Devoir*, Hélène Buzzetti (2012) wrote:

> Nor is Yves Bergeron, Professor of Museum Studies at l’UQAM, surprised by this development. “A change of name does not necessarily imply changing the nature of a museum”, he told me, citing the example of the change of name of the Musée du Québec which became the Musée national des beaux-arts without there being any change to its mission. “In fact,” he added, “five years or so, perhaps more, will need to elapse before we really know whether changes have in fact been made to its content, given that the preparation and mounting of exhibitions is a long-term process.” *(our translation)*

Not unlike the spirit of this present article, the position I described in that interview is based on the argument that our analysis should always provide a historical perspective. The real changes that occur inside museums are not always driven by their mission statements; rather more often, they are the result of strategic orientations adopted by senior management and the Boards of these institutions.

For James Moore’s press conference, a number of items evoking Canadian history had been set out behind Minister Moore, including Maurice Richard’s hockey jersey and the Champlain Astrolabe. It just so happens that I myself have written about this artifact from the French regime, now a seminal piece in the CMC’s collection, although doubts have often been expressed about its authenticity. The history of Champlain’s astrolabe, discovered by accident in 1867 near Cobden, Ontario, has proven to be somewhat controversial (Bergeron 2010; Hunter 2004-2005). Even while there may be reason to question accounts of the astrolabe’s journey, the way this mythical object has been capitalized on reveals a great deal about the role museums play, not always simply as guardians of authentic historical pieces, but in their manifest contribution to the construction of history. Clearly, in their way, they come to define our heritage. The question that then arises is whether the CMH project is likely to produce this kind of effect. If so, there is good reason to be asking some serious questions about the role of museums in society and the degree to which they can maintain the needed critical distance from the political establishment.

Reacting to the Minister’s announcement, the Canadian Museums Association immediately proclaimed its support for the new change in direction. Still, press reviews show that opposition to the project mobilized heritage experts and stakeholders in all parts of the country. In fact, as can be seen in the excerpt below, the Legislative Summary for Bill C-49, describes a variety of positions on this change of status:

> Critics of the change noted the importance the government has placed on military history and speculated whether this would become the focus of the new museum. More broadly, some wondered whether the change was part of a larger strategy to reshape national identity. Specifically, James Turk, Executive Director of the Canadian Association of
University Teachers, lamented the end of the Canada Hall, which he said was the largest and finest social history display in the country. Dan Gardner, columnist for the *Ottawa Citizen*, felt there was nothing wrong with a museum about Canadian history, but he questioned the idea of creating it by changing the current museum’s mandate. Others expressed concern about the closing of the Canadian Postal Museum.9

The Summary quotes both supporters and opponents of the proposed change – sometimes unbeknownst to the latter. On the basis of the interview I gave to *Le Devoir*, I am identified as being in agreement with the changed role for the museum. Had it not been for the background checks I carried out in preparation for writing this article, I would probably never have learned that I had quite involuntarily been placed squarely by the Conservative Government in the camp of those supporting the projected change.10

**THE REAL CHALLENGE: HOW TO DEFEND DEMOCRACY AND KNOWLEDGE-SHARING**

The sheer number of compelling examples means that no-one would deny that museums have been exposed to more than a few ups and downs in their freedom and independence of action, ever since governments came to realize that these institutions had, in their way, become a form of mass media with the potential to influence the country’s citizens and eventually, even tourists. When a government decides to use a museum to legitimize its own ideology, its strategy rests on the conviction that, in the minds of the general public, museums are places of authenticity and truth. Seen in this light, it is perfectly understandable that governments or corporations grasp the strategic importance of being associated with museum programs and exhibits which seem, as André Gob wrote, to be “above reproach” (Gob 2007:331, *our translation*).

Even if cultural democracy seems to be increasingly difficult to maintain in museums, this does not mean that the knowledge museums communicate should not be called into question. Museums provide an ideal unfettered environment for the freedom to share knowledge that Diderot and D’Alembert dreamed of. Still, we should not forget that, even in the Age of Enlightenment, the philosophers found it necessary to fight the forces of political and religious conservatism which, already then, were opposing the democratization of enlightenment and knowledge. Above all, we must certainly not forget that democracy and freedom should never, ever be taken for granted. Museums remain institutions for the promotion of knowledge-sharing and the development of critical thinking, but we still need to maintain ongoing vigilance to ensure that arbitrary thinking, censorship or self-censorship do not endanger the ongoing pursuit of knowledge.

As Roland Arpin so aptly put it (1997:71), “Should museums downplay the role of politics?”:

> It’s not even a question worth asking. Just look at the facts. When people come together in groups, sooner or later they set themselves the goal of persuading others that their ideas or beliefs are the ones to adopt. That’s the essence of politics: the expression of passions, differences of opinion, confrontations, compromises, power struggles. At the same time, a cultural institution that serves the public should not be used as a tool to deceive that public so that certain opinions can prevail. Assuredly, politics play an important role in our cityscapes, but politics are not the method museums should employ to make their choices. In fact, the use of coercion to achieve one’s aims is the antithesis of cultural action. (Arpin 1997:72, *our translation*)

Historically, museums have always been closely linked to the political system. At the same time, their development depends on their capacity to ensure they maintain a reasonable distance from this same system, while remaining acutely aware of the fact that liaisons of this kind are both dangerous and inescapable.
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NOTES
1 My use of the term conventional wisdom is my equivalent of what Bernard Arcand and Serge Bouchard called lieu commun: “An idea, an object or behaviour common to us all and which, because of this, reflects who we are and seems self-evident” (Arcand and Bouchard 2003:8, our translation).
2 In 2008, the Société des musées du Québec (SMQ) took part in the rally organized by the Movement for Arts and Culture on Wednesday September 3, 2008 at Place Royale in Québec City, protesting against the Harper government’s budget cuts to arts and culture (see SMQ 2003).
4 The increase in museum attendance numbers that began in the 1970s has often been attributed to cultural democracy but, when looked at more closely, the statistics show that, while the number of visitors does increase, visits to museums are still largely made by relatively well-educated citizens. In the words of the authors of Déchiffrer la culture (Decoding Culture), “Time has not served to reduce the relative exclusion of the less educated” (Garon and Santerre 2004:60, our translation). Olivier Donnat (2009:187) reached the same conclusion in his analysis of cultural practices in France. The real challenge for museums lies not simply in increasing attendance numbers but rather in attacking the barriers to attendance by the less socially fortunate. From that perspective, much still remains to be done, in spite of the advances achieved by the new museology movement.
5 Note to readers: The Musées de la civilisation use the invariable form of the names of Canada’s First Peoples out of respect for the native languages.
6 The Commission’s report can be consulted on the site of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada: http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071115211819/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sq/smm_f.html
7 In his definition of what he calls the “museum field”, philosopher Bernard Deloche (2011) argues that the particular nature of the field of museology lies in its relation to reality. As Mairese and Laroche (2011) point out, Stransky introduced the term “musealia” to denote authentic museum objects.
8 Legislative Summary of Bill C-49, an Act to amend the Museums Act in order to establish the Canadian Museum of History and to make consequential amendments to other Acts: http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/LegislativeSummaries/41/2/c7-e.pdf (accessed March 12, 2014).
9 Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


