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Canadians' Views on History Education

Three-Quarters (76%) Embarrassed by Lack of Knowledge Canadians Have About their History

Monday, September 10, 2001

81% Call on Federal Government to Have a Strong Role In Setting National Standards for Teaching History

83% Say High School Students Should Be Required to Take at Least Two Canadian History Courses - 73% Give Thumbs Up to Mandatory Testing for History and Social Studies

Toronto, ON –

An Ipsos-Reid poll conducted on behalf of the Dominion Institute shows that three-quarters (76%) of Canadians are embarrassed by our lack of knowledge about the nation's history. Moreover, despite education falling under provincial jurisdiction, 81 percent say they would support a "strong role" for the federal government in setting national standards for teaching history. In addition, 83 percent agree that high school students should be required to take at least two Canadian history courses and 73 percent would support their province introducing mandatory testing for history and social studies.

These are the findings of an Ipsos-Reid poll conducted on behalf of the Dominion Institute between July 24th and July 26th, 2001. The poll is based on a randomly selected sample of 1,002 adult Canadians. With a sample of this size, the results are considered accurate to within ± 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, of what they would have been had the entire adult Canadian population been polled. The margin of error will be larger within regions and for other sub-groupings of the survey population. These data were statistically weighted to ensure the sample's regional and age/sex composition reflects that of the actual Canadian population according to the 1996 Census data.

Three Quarters (76%) Embarrassed by Lack of Knowledge Canadians Have About their History

Most (76%) Canadians agree with the statement "I am embarrassed about the lack of knowledge that Canadians have about their history". This includes 45 percent who "strongly agree" and another three in ten (31%) who "somewhat agree". Only 22 percent disagree with the statement (16% "somewhat disagree", 7% "strongly disagree").

Canadians clearly do not think that their history is boring, as three-quarters (74%) disagree with the statement "Canadian history is boring" (53% "strongly disagree" while 21% "somewhat disagree") and a third (35%) say history was their "favourite subject" when they were in school. In contrast, only 9 percent say history was a subject they "always tried to avoid" while the majority, (55%) say history "was a subject I neither liked nor disliked".

The bulk (61%) of Canadians have studied Canadian history up to the high school level while 12 percent have studied at



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CONTACT



John Wright
Senior Vice President / Vice-président sénior
Global @dvisor
(416) 324-2002
john.wright@ipsos.com

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Ontarians (30%) are more likely than the rest of Canada (22%) to agree that Canadian history is boring.

Residents of BC (16%) are more likely than other Canadians (8%) to say history was a subject they always tried to avoid.

Canadians aged 55 and over (41%) are more likely than those under 55 (32%) to say history was their favourite subject.

81% Call on Federal Government to Have a Strong Role In Setting National Standards for Teaching History

Eight in ten (81%) Canadians agree that they "would support a strong role for the federal government in setting national standards for teaching history", including 43 percent who "strongly agree". While education is a provincial jurisdiction the federal government has played a role in public education through the Council of Ministers of Education and other intergovernmental bodies. This is set against a backdrop of near unanimity (96% important, 76% "very important") among Canadians in all provinces that it is important for students across Canada to acquire the same body of historical facts and knowledge. Furthermore, 80 percent say that "national standards for teaching Canadian history are a good idea because they will help foster Canadians' sense of national identity by ensuring that students from across the country learn the same history". This compares with 18 percent who are of the opposing viewpoint: "national standards for teaching Canadian history are a bad idea because they will eliminate the flexibility teachers currently have to teach students about their province's unique history". Canadians say that if the provinces were to agree to national standards for teaching Canadian history, on average 60 percent of each province's curriculum should be common across the country.

While still very supportive, residents of Québec (76%) are slightly less likely than the rest of Canada (82%) to support a strong role for the federal government in setting standards for teaching history.

While slightly lower than the rest of Canada (82%), three-quarters (74%) of Québécois say national standards for teaching Canadian history would be a "good idea".

83% Say High School Students Should Be Required to Take at Least Two Canadian History Courses - 73% Give Thumbs Up to Mandatory Testing for History and Social Studies

Canadians are not simply paying lip service to the importance of Canadian history as 83 percent agree that "high school history students should be required to take at least two Canadian history courses (54% "strongly agree", 29% "somewhat agree") and 73 percent say they would support their province "introducing mandatory testing for history and social studies" (40% "strongly support", 33% "somewhat support"). On an open-ended basis, Confederation (27%) emerges as the historical event that Canadians say is most important to teach students about. In second place is Canada's involvement in the two world wars (12%) and the patriation of the Canadian Constitution (7%). Finally, despite the focus in recent years on math and sciences, six in ten (60%) Canadians disagree that "studying history is not as important as studying math and science" (33% "strongly disagree", 27% "somewhat disagree").

Québecers' assessment of the most important events to teach high school students differs from the rest of Canada. While still the top mention, Québecers (17%) are less likely than the rest of Canada (31%) to say Confederation is the most important event. Similarly, 2 percent of Québecers vs. 15 percent in the rest of Canada choose Canada's involvement in the two world wars. In contrast, Québecers (13%) are much more likely than the rest of Canada (1%) to say that the discovery of Canada is the most important historical event to teach to students.

Ontarians (46%) are more likely than the rest of Canada (35%) to agree that studying history is not as important as studying math and science.

For more information on this news release, please contact:

John Wright
Senior Vice President
Public Affairs
Ipsos-Reid
(416) 324-2900

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