

# COUNTERPOINTS: History thrown overboard with Cornwallis course corrections

Contributed

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 Bruce MacKinnon's Feb. 2, 2018 cartoon on the removal of Edward Cornwallis's statue in Halifax.

Bruce MacKinnon's Feb. 2, 2018 cartoon on the removal of Edward Cornwallis's statue in Halifax. - Bruce MacKinnon



## HRM task force sweeps aside other founders' contributions to modern-day Nova Scotia

**LEO J. DEVEAU**

With the recent release of the Task Force on the Commemoration of Edward Cornwallis and the Recognition and Commemoration of Indigenous History, I'd like to express my thanks to task force members for their efforts.

However, their report only merits a C+ in my books. If the task force report, [endorsed by council this week](#), is to be treated as an important document in “going forward” for council’s planning on matters relating to commemorating Halifax’s early settlement history, as well as Mi’kmaw history and culture, then, in the spirit of reconciliation, it sadly lacks any balance in historical context. Reconciliation is a two-way street, acknowledging all parties’ responsibility in decisions and actions taken in the past that caused harm. It is not about blame and shame, which this report clearly reflects.

It is, in essence, a mea culpa for the benefit of Mi’kmaw people, but little else is offered to the non-Indigenous residents of HRM. The report reflects the current censorious academic flavour of the month that has been sweeping through the hallways of history and Indigenous studies departments at universities — namely that the process of colonization was a violent act against Indigenous cultures and that those countries responsible for such actions (including specific individuals) should no longer be commemoratively acknowledged. Thus, history has now become both ideological and political — never mind any consideration of the times and historical context.

This view now sees Indigenous Peoples as seemingly blameless in their acts of terror and mischief because they were simply defending “their unceded lands,” while colonial settlers were uninvited and

trespassing. In the case of Cornwallis, he is also accused of genocide with no historical documented evidence to substantiate the questionable charge.

At the same time, we have the co-chair of the task force, Monica MacDonald, commenting in the media that “colonization was inherently violent,” perhaps expecting residents to believe that nothing good has come out of colonizing Nova Scotia!

With a 50-50 partnership between HRM and the Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi’kmaw Chiefs, it is not surprising that the Cornwallis statue was recommended to stay under wraps for the foreseeable future (and by implication, the historical details relating to the founding of the British settlement at Chebucto), leaving the rest of the recommendations to focus on supporting and encouraging better awareness of Mi’kmaw history and culture — all worthy initiatives. However, the report makes no effort to recommend ways in which HRM’s non-Indigenous residents should acknowledge and celebrate the founding of the British settlement (and the naming of Halifax) in 1749 by 2,500-plus settlers, led by, you know, that British officer whose name/statue, according to the report, “common decency forbids” us to use again, or to mention.

The task force was set up at a time when the Cornwallis statue came down as a result of a “threat to public safety” (as a result of a bully protest crowd threatening damage to public property) and “reputational risk” to the city. It was further fuelled by a grievance poem read by Mi’kmaw poet Rebecca Thomas to council, seemingly convincing some councillors that they had to do something quickly!

Reading between the lines, it became apparent to many residents that the issue of the task force on Cornwallis actually had little to do with his statue, but with the very acts of colonization reflecting in the establishment of the Halifax settlement — even though under the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), mainland Nova Scotia was a British colony at the time of Cornwallis’s arrival, as much as Ile Royale (Cape Breton) was also a French colony guarded by the massive Fortress Louisbourg. Welcome to context. However, fuelled by author Daniel Paul’s book *We Were Not the Savages* — surprise, surprise, he’s a task force member! — the Cornwallis issue became the lightning rod to justify the victim narrative of the Mi’kmaq: that the British settled on unceded land (though Utrecht stated otherwise), rather than the fact that the Mi’kmaq were very capable of defending themselves, scalping settlers and soldiers, and making mischief alongside their French allies (until they were simply overwhelmed in numbers and in strength, resulting in the little-read or understood Treaties of Articles and Submission of the period).

In summary, the task force completely missed an opportunity with the Mi’kmaw panel members to also acknowledge, in a spirit of reconciliation, the British and French heritage (and many other cultures) that developed from the early settlement times in Nova Scotia — heritage which, in the case of the British, also became the founding roots of our democratic values, first in representative government (1758-60), the incorporation of Halifax (1841), and later with responsible government (1847-48).

The lack of this acknowledgement is disheartening. If there are members of council who do not notice or recognize this, and simply accept the narrative of the evil colonials heaping violence on the Indigenous inhabitants, then it says a great deal about the lack of depth in historical knowledge that currently sits at the council table. CAO Jacques Dubé, in his June 30 memo to HRM council,

commented that “there are no significant risks identified associated with accepting the recommendations in the report,” but he may have overlooked that municipal elections will be held in the fall.

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The CCGS Edward Cornwallis. - FILE PHOTO

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## Plan to rename coast guard ship rests on flawed premise

**LEN CANFIELD**

Canadians are supportive of advancing reconciliation with Indigenous people in a reasoned and collaborative manner, based on recognized historical context.

At the same time, and as we proceed on our “shared journey,” Nova Scotians may have reason to question the rationale, tone and timing of [the June 30 news release](#): “Government of Canada and Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi’kmaw Chiefs announce partnership to change name of Canadian Coast Guard ship Edward Cornwallis.”

Fisheries, Oceans and Canadian Coast Guard Minister Bernadette Jordan commented, in part: “Reconciliation is imperative to our country’s future ... to right the wrongs of our past... (and) Cornwallis’s legacy doesn’t reflect the values Canadians hold today.”

The announcement’s limited and one-sided historical context supporting the renaming includes the statement that “Cornwallis sought to drive the Mi’kmaq from their lands ... through barbaric measures including a bounty against the Mi’kmaq men, women and children.”

The bounty proclamation issued by Cornwallis was directed at Mi’kmaq warriors and intended to protect the settlers he had brought with him in 1749, and others who followed to settle Halifax, Dartmouth and Lunenburg. The proclamation makes no reference to women and children. As well, the June 30 announcement makes no mention of what was happening in Nova Scotia prior to, during and following Cornwallis’s three years as governor, opposed by a hostile French-Indigenous alliance, or that he initiated a peace initiative with the Mi’kmaq in 1751 and revoked the bounty in 1752.

The 1749-59 period was a troubling and painful time in our province’s history, with non-combatants (men, women and children) on all sides suffering violent deaths. With bounties paid by the French at Louisbourg and the British actions, suffice to say there were few saints among the respective combatants. Regardless of how one views Cornwallis’s deeds as governor, he is due recognition for establishing, defending and ensuring the settlement survived during a turbulent period.

Reconciliation should be about education and open-minded, respectful and transparent conversations centered around building on our shared past — not removing, renaming or relegating historical personalities that, in the view of some, don’t “reflect today’s values” or to appease special-interest groups. Let’s avoid the slippery slopes of recrimination and retribution.

A potential and promising “building” opportunity involves the Canadian Coast Guard’s new offshore fisheries and science vessels (built under the National Shipbuilding Strategy) and to name one of the new vessels in partnership with the Mi’kmaw community. In the meantime, maintain the CCGS Edward Cornwallis name while the ship remains in service.

Minister Jordan should consider mustering “all hands on deck” for a wider, “refreshed” look at renaming the ship.

**Len Canfield lives in Halifax.**

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1 being least likely, and 10 being most likely

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