

What's in a name? Call to remove John A. Macdonald's from schools meets firm opposition

Most say a person's entire life & principal legacy should determine if they're publicly memorialized

August 28, 2017 – A call from the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario to remove the name of Canada's first prime minister from public schools because of his [support for Indigenous assimilation](#) through residential education is being met with more than twice as much opposition as support.

The latest survey from the Angus Reid Institute finds more than half of Canadians (55%) say they would oppose such a move, while one-quarter (25%) are in favour. A significant segment – nearly one-in-five (19%) could not offer an opinion.

This comes against the backdrop of tensions over the legacy, role and place of historical monuments south of the border. As protests and counter-protests over Confederate statues in the U.S. have turned violent, attention in this country has turned to Canada's own memorialization of historical figures.

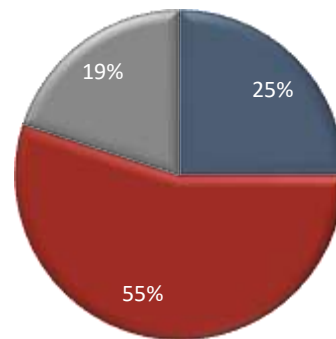
In recent times, concerns about the contributions of some of Canada's founders to the establishment of residential schools and the abuse of Indigenous people have led to the renaming of [bridges](#) and [buildings](#) and the removal of [statues](#) across the country.

However, these survey results show that the vast majority of Canadians (88%) are of the view that a person's entire life and principal legacy that should determine which historical figures ought to be – or ought to continue to be – memorialized.

Key Findings:

- Opposition to removing John A. Macdonald differs along political lines. Past Conservative voters are almost twice as likely as past New Democratic Party voters to oppose removal (76% versus

Do you support or oppose renaming schools named after John A. Macdonald?



■ Support ■ Oppose ■ Not sure/Can't say

METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from August 25 - 27 among a representative randomized sample of 1512 Canadian adults who are members of the [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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41%). Past Liberals occupy the middle ground: 56 per cent oppose removing the name of Canada's first prime minister from schools. Macdonald, it should be noted, was a Conservative PM.

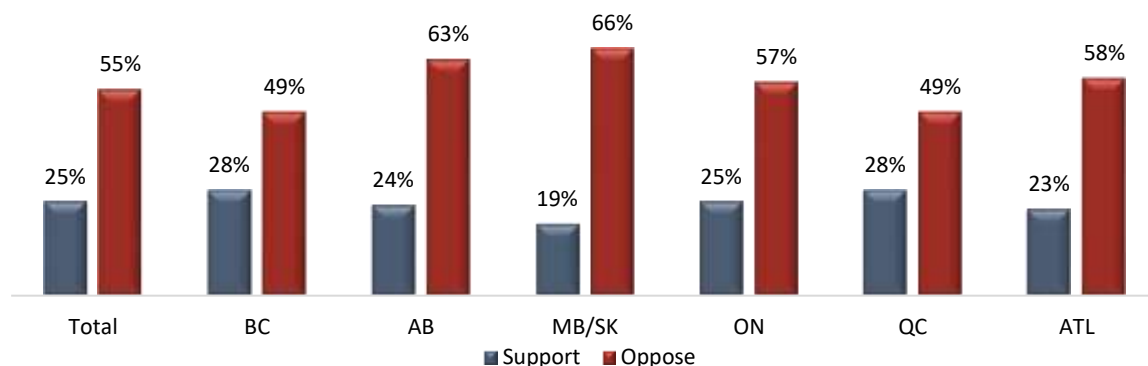
- Canadians are much more divided over the renaming of the Langevin Block building in Ottawa, and the proposed removal of a statue of Edward Cornwallis in Halifax.
- Seven-in-ten (69%) say historical figures should not be judged by modern concepts of racism. The same number say that statues of historical figures such as Cornwallis would be better placed in museums to be discussed with proper context

More than half oppose removing John A. Macdonald's name from schools

Last week, a union representing Ontario teachers passed a motion stating that John A. Macdonald's name should no longer be displayed on schools in the province. The suggestion from the union is that Canada's first prime minister was one of the key architects of Canada's residential school system, along with other policies of assimilation and abuse against Indigenous peoples.

But more than half of Canadians (55%) say they oppose such a move – fully two times as many as those who say they support something the [Prime Minister](#) has ruled out when it comes to properties under the federal purview, and that the [Premier of Ontario](#) has spoken against as well:

Do you support or oppose renaming schools named after John A. Macdonald?



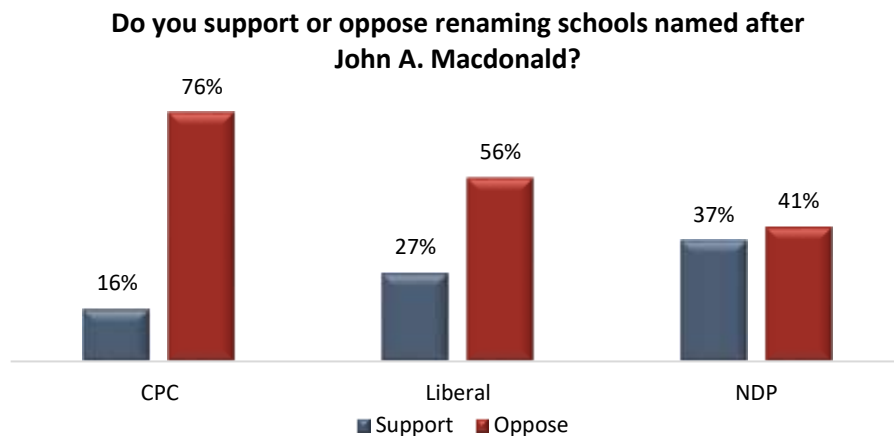
Before considering this question, respondents were presented with both the fact that Macdonald was the first prime minister of the country, and that he approved the first residential schools ([see questionnaire here](#)).

While younger Canadians and women are slightly more accepting of the idea of removal ([see comprehensive tables](#)), the largest divides on this question are political in nature. Past Liberal voters mirror the national sentiment, but those who cast ballots for the Conservatives and NDP take harder lines.

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Three-quarters of past Conservative supporters oppose the change, while NDP supporters are split close to evenly:

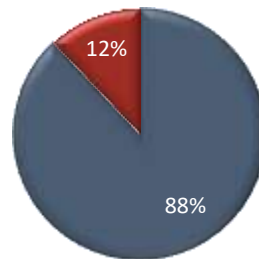


For those opposed to seeing Macdonald’s name removed, much of the debate hinges on the accomplishments of the man outweighing the objectionable policies he oversaw and statements he made toward Indigenous peoples.

Macdonald was quoted as saying that “Indian” children were surrounded by “savages” and must be “withdrawn as much as possible” from the influence of their parents and culture. However, he is also one of the primary reasons modern Canada came to be. He brought the provinces together to form a confederation in 1867, oversaw the building of the Trans-Canadian railroad, and was instrumental in building the nation’s economy through [the National Policy](#).

Certainly, there are competing perspectives on this issue, and Canadians say these accomplishments and injuries should be taken into account when deciding to name a school or a building after a historical figure. Nine-in-ten Canadians say that a person’s entire life and principal legacy should be used to decide on the naming of public monuments:

In assessing names to monuments, we should take into account the entire life of an individual and principal legacy they left behind:



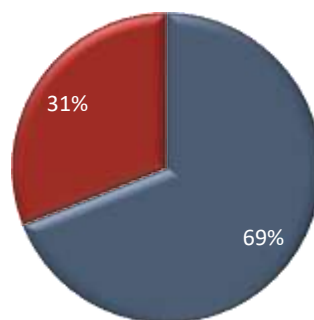
■ Agree ■ Disagree

Opponents of such monuments point to the scale of abuse directed at Indigenous peoples and the enduring pain these symbols can cause. As Ontario's Premier Kathleen Wynne stated in 2016, [when discussing the residential school system](#):

"Indigenous people became the target of colonial policies designed to exploit, assimilate and eradicate them. Based on racism, violence and deceit, these policies were devastatingly effective. They disempowered individuals and disenfranchised entire communities."

But in judging that legacy and how it applies to individuals, many Canadians say the prevalent racist ideas and practices of the time should not be judged through modern standards.

We should not judge historical figures by today's concepts of racism



■ Agree ■ Disagree

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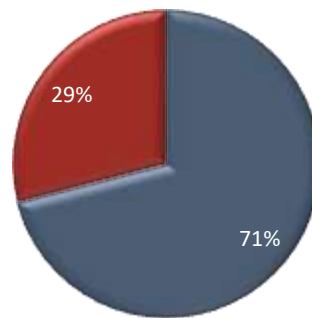
There is evidently concern that if this were the case, most Canadians at the time of confederation would be judged as [racists, colonizers, and misogynists](#). The argument for those who oppose stripping historical figures of their place in public spaces is that they were a product of the time.

Indeed, from the internment of Canadians of Japanese origin during the Second World War, to the push to keep Asian workers from settling in British Columbia at the turn of the last century, Canada's history is laced with troubling, but, at the time, acceptable and even popular treatment of non-European peoples. As [Macdonald said](#), in pushing for policy to keep Chinese workers out of Canada, it "may be right or it may be wrong, it may be prejudice or otherwise, but the prejudice is near universal."

Such concern, however, does not necessarily translate into a blanket desire to see these figures celebrated in public squares. One proposal that supporters of monument removal have offered as a means to deal with the changing sensibilities of time is to have monuments placed in museums or educational facilities, to more appropriately explain the context and history of the person's thinking or actions.

Seven-in-ten Canadians say they agree with this idea, suggesting they would be more open to removal if this were the plan:

These statues would be better placed in museums, where they are able to be viewed with proper historical context



■ Agree ■ Disagree

Canadians divided on removing other historical figures

Though most Canadians oppose removing John A. Macdonald's name from schools that currently bear it, they express greater ambivalence toward other historical figures whose monuments have come under fire in recent months.

In July, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [removed the name of Hector-Louis Langevin](#) from the building in Ottawa that houses the offices of the PM and the Privy Council. Langevin was a member of Macdonald's cabinet, a former mayor of Quebec City, and a well-known proponent of the residential school system.

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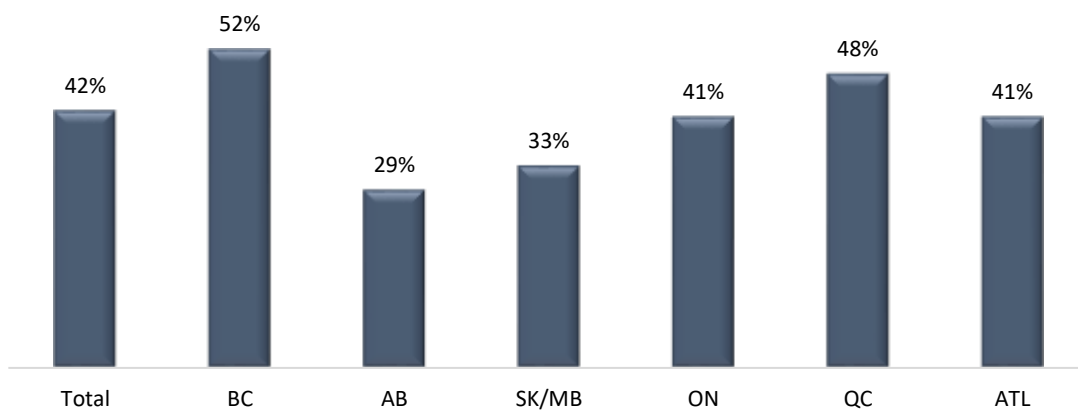
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“Keeping that name on the prime minister’s office is inconsistent with the values of our government,” Trudeau said when announcing the change. “It is inconsistent with our vision of a strong partnership with Indigenous peoples in Canada.”

On this, many Canadians share the Prime Minister’s view. Some four-in-ten (42%) say they support the decision to change the name, while one-in-three (32%) are opposed. The rest (26%) are unsure.

Support for removing Langevin’s name is highest in British Columbia – where it reaches 52 per cent – and in Langevin’s native Quebec, where nearly half of respondents (48%) support the renaming of the Langevin block:

Support for changing the name of the Langevin Block building, by region:



Canadians’ greater willingness to see Langevin’s name removed than Macdonald’s may reflect the lesser profile of the former in Canadian history. While Macdonald is a household name, Langevin – for most – is not. In this sense, Canadians may be applying the reasoning about accounting for an individual’s entire life and principal legacy. Macdonald’s principal legacy is well-known, and considered fundamental in a way that Langevin’s is not.

This dynamic can be seen at play on a regional level in responses to a question about Edward Cornwallis – the British military general who founded Halifax in 1749 and issued a cash bounty for the killing of Indigenous people in Nova Scotia later that year.

The statue of Cornwallis in Halifax’s Cornwallis Square has been [the subject of protests](#) this summer, with Mi’kmaq activists arguing that it should be removed, and the square renamed.

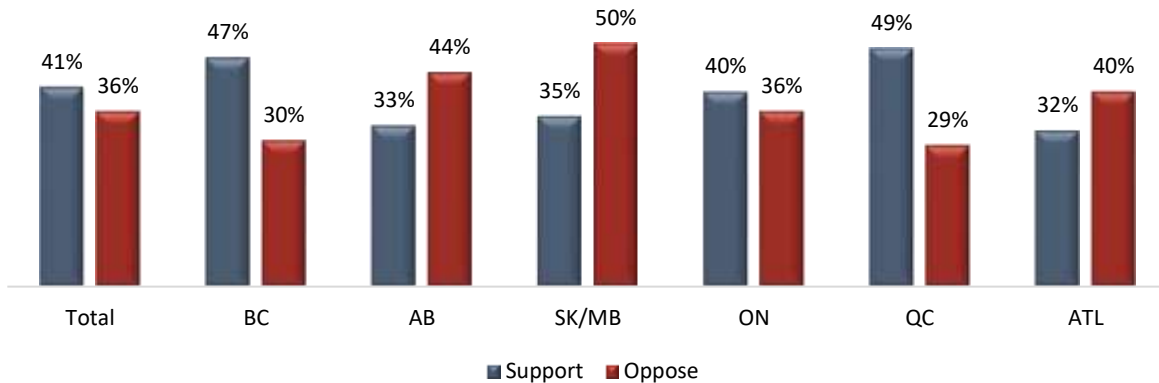
Again, Canadians are divided on what should be done. Four-in-ten (41%) support removing the statue and changing the square’s name, while 36 per cent are opposed. Nearly one-in-four (23%) are unsure.

In Atlantic Canada, however, where Cornwallis is best known and where his principal legacy is most important, respondents lean toward opposition, as seen in the following graph:

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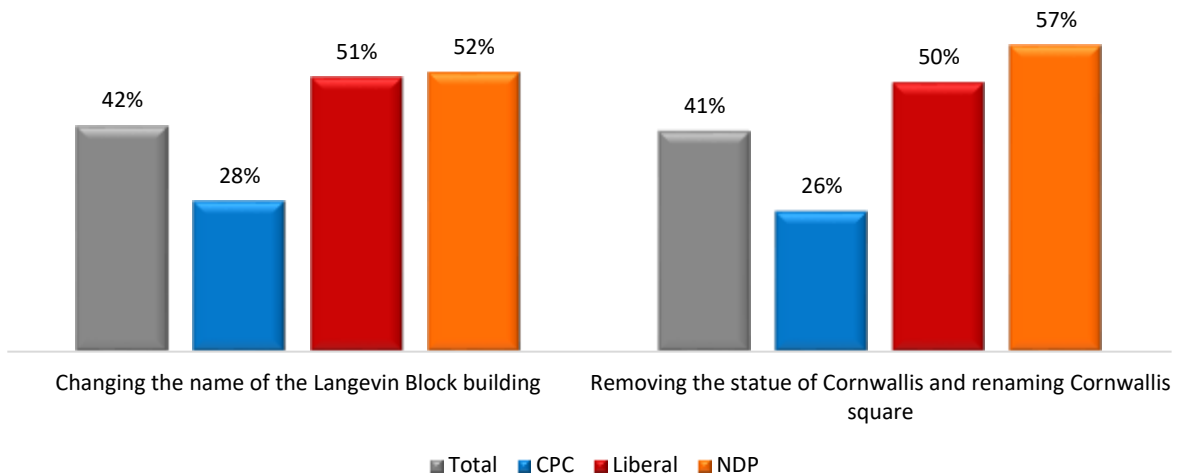
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Would you support or oppose removing the statue in Halifax and changing the name of Cornwallis Square, where it stands?



As with opinion on John A. Macdonald, political preferences are strongly correlated with opinions on Cornwallis and Langevin, with those who voted for the Conservatives in 2015 much less supportive of removing references to the two men, and past Liberal and NDP voters much more so:

Percentage who support each of the following:



Who should be responsible for deciding a name should go?

Halifax's mayor has said he plans to appoint a committee to determine the fate of his city's various monuments to its founder. This approach is likely to elicit a favourable reaction from most Canadians,

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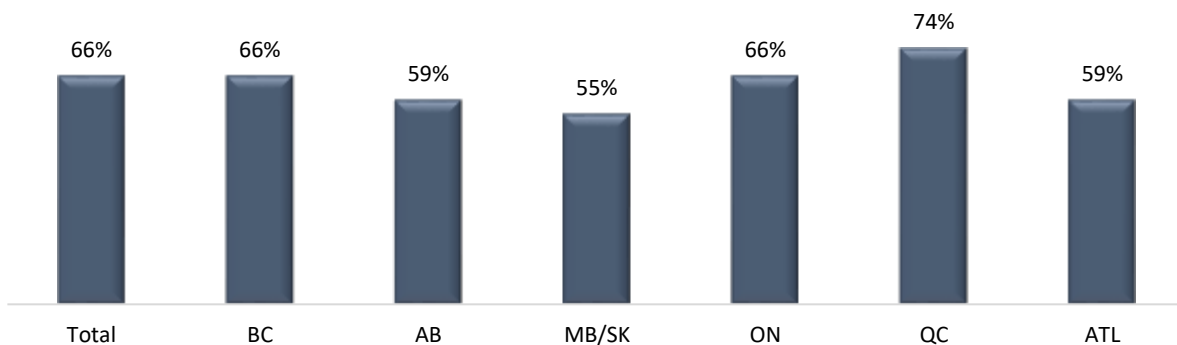
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who aren't certain that the power to remove the names of historical figures from public spaces should rest with just one person.

Two-thirds (66%) would support a policy similar to that put forth by Yale University in its attempt to quell the controversy surrounding these issues on campus. The Yale policy requires first, the submission of a formal application for removal of a statue or name. The application must have attached historical research to support the claim that the targeted monument should be removed. The submission is then reviewed by an independent, 12-person committee, which then rules on the merits of the submission.

The establishment of committees of this sort enjoys majority support across the country:

Governments should have an independent committee in place to consider formal proposals for the renaming of monuments, schools and other institutions



*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

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