

Meeting 14                      The Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

November 24, 2011    8:45 a.m -10:45 a.m. (EST) 131 Queen Street, Room:8-53

Leslie H Oliver, President  
Black Cultural Society of Nova Scotia

24 November, 2011

Canadians with African Heritage – Sesquicentennial themes

Mr Chairman, I am Leslie Oliver, President of the Black Cultural Society of Nova Scotia. We are delighted to have this opportunity to add our opinions to the discussion of the 2017 sesquicentennial celebrations. Our organization specializes in preserving, protecting and promoting the heritage of thousands of citizens of African descent in Nova Scotia who have labored hard to build this country and are eager to celebrate the sesquicentennial in 2017.

A celebration of this magnitude provides an opportunity to reflect on our most cherished beliefs. For example in 2008, the 250th anniversary of parliamentary democracy was celebrated in Nova Scotia. At the Black Cultural Centre we erected a stone monument which we call our "FREEDOM STONE" in honour of our ancestors who

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came seeking freedom from the oppression of slavery. That monument is now a permanent reminder of the role that democratic decisions played for people of African Descent who were seeking refuge. We use it to encourage young people to think about social responsibility. I am confident that 2017 can provide inspirational symbols to mark the many gains that our country has made.

As an example, I am a proud Canadian with ancestors who arrived in Eastern Canada when it was still a British Colony. As I reflected on the celebration of confederation I was reminded that my elder daughter was born in the centennial year 1967 and two generations earlier, my Mother was born in the semicentennial year 1917. My parents, grandparents, and some great-grandparents were alive in 1917 to celebrate that 50 year mark of our confederation. My great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather were two of many people of African heritage living here in 1867, as founding citizens of Canada. My

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great-great-great-grandfather, Moses Oliver, fought to leave slavery in Maryland around 1815 and provide a life of freedom for his wife, children and descendants. The story of Canada includes many citizens of African descent who were proud to be Canadian even at times when Canada was not particularly supportive of them.

The March conference report on 150! Canada proposed the theme of diversity in several ways. It acknowledges that different citizens may celebrate in different ways and may celebrate different aspects of Canada. Certainly Canadians of African descent will celebrate major accomplishments and changes that might not seem so important to others. Since our Black Cultural Centre opened in 1983 it has assisted writers and researchers in filling a void of knowledge about the accomplishments and development of African Nova Scotians. The Canadian sesquicentennial can generate similar exploration on the national level.

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The conference report expressed the theme of including all Canadians in the celebrations. This is important but I didn't see any suggestion that African Canadian will be explicitly represented or included. In my experience Canadian practice has historically excluded whole segments of the population, for example during our first century Canada restricted and excluded blacks from military service, police service, nursing service, educational opportunity and leadership positions. One would hope that the sesquicentennial celebration will reflect the different reality that has evolved in the past 50 years. The pace of change can be encouraged by a celebration that recognizes the past, reflects on the present and aims for a finer future. Much of that change has been brought about by government response to inequity.

In Nova Scotia our Centre features three major migrations of free Blacks to our East coast 50 to 80 years before Canadian confederation. The first of those migrations was

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about 3000 Black Loyalists who fled the US Revolution just like the United Empire Loyalists did. The Black Loyalists had been promised freedom from slavery and real citizenship if they left their slave owners and joined the British military forces. Over 10% of the Loyalists coming to Canada were Black.

So migration number one was The Black Loyalists of 1783

The second migration of free blacks came 13 years later, in 1796. Approximately 300 Jamaican Maroons were exiled to Halifax. They were free Blacks living in Jamaica who made life difficult for the slave owners of the Jamaican plantations.

So, the second migration was the Maroons who came in 1796.

The third of our historic migrations followed the War of 1812 when the British, again, offered freedom in return

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for joining the British side. About 1500 "Chesapeake Refugees of the War of 1812" arrived in Halifax around 1815. That was migration number 3.

When I was growing up, these three migrations were not mentioned in schools. Many refused to acknowledge that 10% of the British Loyalists were Black. No one mentioned the Trelawney Maroons, living for over 150 years as free people in Jamaica and being brought to Nova Scotia to do physical labour. History did not mention the connection between the War of 1812 and the settlement of Blacks in Nova Scotia. However the founders of the Black Cultural Centre saw the need to give children a sense of owning a tradition of strength and perseverance.

So far I have talked about the population of people with African heritage who were here before confederation. The thousands of black immigrants who have come to Canada in more recent years from Africa and the Caribbean are a significant portion of the population of Canada. The

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international aspect of the 2017 celebration was highlighted in the conference report where it was stated “to include all Canadians, we need to take this celebration to the world”. This leads to recognizing the connection of Canada to the global African Diaspora and, again quoting from the report, to “build the Canada that we want”.

One would hope that the impact of the centuries-old propaganda which stereotyped Africans as intellectually deficient physical automatons can be effectively counteracted by modern fact-based communication. Celebration of Canada’s progress at replacing fiction with fact and overturning past wrongs can help dilute the power of the old myths.

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
CANADIAN HERITAGE**



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
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PATRIMOINE CANADIEN**

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**CONFIRMATION OF  
APPEARANCE**

**CONFIRMATION DE  
COMPARUTION**

**STUDY:**  
Canada's 150th Anniversary in 2017

**ÉTUDE :**  
Le 150e anniversaire du Canada en 2017

<b>Date of appearance:</b> Thursday, November 24, 2011	<b>Date de comparution :</b> Le jeudi 24 novembre 2011
<b>Time:</b> 8:45 a.m. to 10:45 a.m.	<b>Heure :</b> 8 h 45 à 10 h 45
<b>Location:</b> Room 8-53 131 Queen Street	<b>Endroit :</b> Pièce 8-53 131, rue Queen

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Please limit your presentation to the Committee to ten (10) minutes so that substantial time may be given to questions from the members of the Committee.

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Veillez limiter votre présentation au Comité à dix (10) minutes afin que l'essentiel de la durée de la séance puisse être réservé aux questions qui vous seront posées par les membres du Comité.

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