

The Importance of Understanding History

By Sydney Szijarto , a recent graduate of St. John Catholic High School
and the recipient of the 2020 Tay Valley History Scholarship

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The 21st century has stopped placing importance on the humanities that they deserve. They are overlooked as passé, less important than the pure sciences that potentially save lives and move society forward. This does not bode well for our future. If we keep flying full speed into the future without checking ourselves against the past, we can head straight into disasters we would otherwise have seen coming. It's a vital balance.

There are hundreds of societies that have come before us, each unique in the way they distributed power, dealt with threats, structured their economy, or chose their values. With the help of historians, the factors in these societies' rise, reign, and fall can be analyzed—used to determine their strengths, as well as their mistakes. It is absurd to imagine that we are walking in unprecedented times, with nothing to guide us. While technology may be new, people and the way they think, react, and strive in a certain context remain constant.

We will use the pandemic as an example. Scientists take an entirely new virus and compare it to everything they have seen before. They can then adapt an approach used in the past, in an effort to create a vaccine that could potentially save thousands of lives. Meanwhile, historians are doing the same thing: analyzing pandemics throughout history. Which government responses were effective? How did the populace react? How does a sudden halt affect us economically? Socially? Historians are not looking into the past just for the fun of it. Their job is to adapt what they find to address modern issues—even anticipate them—often helping to avoid problems that could affect countless lives.

The economic recession of 2008 demonstrates the importance of history. It had the capacity to be a depression, and people were terrified for their jobs, their security. The Great Depression of the 1930s, however, provided a perfect model for reference—and the Canadian government knew it. Historians took a look at the causes of the Great Depression and, more importantly, determined that the work generated by the Second

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World War helped bring us out of it. Therefore, unlike previous administrations, the Canadian government stopped hoarding their money and instead poured it into new projects, such as construction, creating jobs to help get the economy back to its feet. Without a keen understanding of history, it is quite likely that we would only just be recovering from the fallout now.

We can choose to move forward blindly, but we need to remember that it is our responsibility as citizens to change the world for the better, as much as we can. If we use the societies that came before us as a resource in our decision making, our children can inherit a world that is beautiful and healthy in all respects—ethically, socially, politically, and economically.