

MONDAY COMMENTARY

By Dr Dennis Sammut



CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE

Donald Trump's second presidency in the United States has been marked by a series of outrageous statements and actions that have gripped world attention. Some, like the demand that Canada becomes the 51st state, will never happen, others, like the threat to invade Greenland, are unlikely to happen and, on some, President Trump will change his mind, as he often does. Regardless, they provide a distraction to other acts that, whilst equally outrageous, received less attention, even if they form part of Trump's core strategy. In this category, one can put the dismissal of Carla Hayden as the Librarian of Congress and Colleen Shogan as Archivist of the United States. Their replacement with Trump loyalists is a signal of Trump's determination to control the narrative about his presidency, define what is truth and what is a lie, and make sure future generations will depend on a doctored history.

The Library of Congress is a venerable American institution renowned for its integrity. It is not only the library of the legislative arm of government, the US Senate and House of Representatives, it is the main depository library in the United States. The dismissal of its head Carla Hayden, shocked the American intellectual elite. Carla Hayden was the 14th Librarian of Congress and the first woman and the first African-American, to hold the post. She was hailed for making the Library of Congress more accessible.

The Library of Congress

The Library of Congress is the largest library in the world, with millions of books, films and video and audio recordings, photographs, newspapers, maps and manuscripts in its collections.

In her message on the Library website before her dismissal, Carla Hayden says that "the Library preserves and provides access to a rich, diverse and enduring source of knowledge to inform, inspire and engage you in your intellectual and creative endeavours".

The Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford is a sister library to the Library of Congress and also a depository library. Writing in the Financial Times on 12 May, Richard Ovenden, Director of the Bodleian Library, said that "the removal of Hayden and Shogan demonstrates the exercise of arbitrary power, asserting control over knowledge. Both are the first women to lead their respective institutions, and both are committed to reaching all parts of the nation they were appointed to serve. If the ideologically motivated censorship of collections and the recent mass deletion of government websites is anything to go by, the Trump administration is intent on removing swaths of knowledge from public circulation".

Both the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., and the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, are much more than the depository of books, though there are certainly plenty of books in both places. They are centres of knowledge, including of the sort you are unlikely to find anywhere else.

I had a small experience of this whilst researching my thesis at Oxford University. I worked every day at the Bodleian Library surrounded by books and history. At some, I came across a handwritten note by Julian Amery at a time in 1972 when he had just been appointed Minister in the Foreign Office. I knew that the note was about the Sultan of Oman, a long-time personal friend of

Amery, who had just died. In 1970 he had been deposed by the British who felt that he was obstructing their plans to modernise Oman. The problem was that Amery's handwriting was awful, and I just couldn't read what Minister Amery had written. I consulted my supervisor and various other people but none could. Then someone suggested I consult someone at the Bodleian. I made an appointment and duly made my way up a long, spiral flight of stairs, until right at the top, in the attic, I found an old lady and I explained my predicament. "They had a terrible handwriting these Ministers", she told me before reading out the text, which until a moment before had been unreadable. Thus was my small, modest experience, of being exposed to the knowledge that is part of the Bodleian. The Library of Congress is similar, though on a larger scale. This is why many American intellectuals are shocked to hear of the dismissal of Carla Hayden, as the Librarian of Congress.

On hearing the news, American Library Association President Cindy Hohl wrote, "I am deeply disappointed in last night's decision by President Trump to fire Dr. Carla Hayden from her position as Librarian of Congress. I salute Dr. Carla Hayden, a wise and faithful steward of the Library of Congress – the library she has called our 'national treasure.' Dr Hayden's abrupt and unjust dismissal is an insult to the scope and breadth of work Dr Hayden has undertaken in her role leading the Library of Congress." She adds that "by throwing open the doors of the venerable Library of Congress to welcome everyone, Dr Hayden has revealed what the highest library in the land and what every library is: a bastion of knowledge and a beacon of opportunity."

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The appointment of Carla Hayden's successor offers us a glimpse of what Trump is trying to achieve. He is Todd Blanche, the lawyer who represented Donald Trump during his 2024 criminal trial.

Donald Trump is intent that history be written to serve his purpose. His control of the Archive of the United States and the Library of Congress are steps in this direction. The Democratic Party is still shell-shocked by Trump's victory and is, at least for the moment, unable to stop Trump's excesses. The American people have to do this themselves before their history is rewritten. 🟡

Source: Dr Dennis Sammut is the Director of LINKS Europe Foundation and Managing Editor of commonsplace.eu.

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