Response to Japanese internment

The movement for redress and early government responses

One of the Canadian government’s first efforts to redress (make up for) the wrongs done to Japanese Canadians was to pay them back for their losses during World War II. In 1950, Justice Henry Bird recommended that individuals should receive $1.2 million compensation, but that their legal fees should be deducted from this amount. This amounted to $52.00 a person. While some individuals accepted this offer, most did not even file claims. For the next 20 years, there were no further compensation protests.

In the 1970s, the government allowed public access to government files. This allowed members of the public to review the government’s wartime actions. Despite the fact that they were labeled “enemy aliens,” it was revealed that the Japanese in Canada were never a threat to national security. In fact, documents indicated that the government’s wartime actions were motivated by anti-Asian fears and the racist feelings of that period. Documents also showed that the war provided the government with an opportunity to respond to what was referred to as the “Japanese problem.” The wrongs of the past were being exposed and could no longer be denied.

The year 1977 marked the 100th anniversary of the arrival of Manzo Nagano, the first Japanese immigrant to Canada. During this year, the contributions of Japanese Canadians to Canadian society were highlighted. However, the injustices suffered by the Japanese during the war years were also revealed. As a result, the seeds for a redress campaign to be headed by the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) were planted. Eleven long years of struggle that included countless meetings, broken promises, disagreements within the Japanese community, rallies and protests, rejected proposals, public pressure, and an American government settlement for Japanese Americans, finally resulted in an agreement between the NAJC and the government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

Government apology and the redress agreement

In his remarks to the House of Commons on September 22, 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney officially apologized to Japanese Canadians for their internment during World War II. He stated,

I know that I speak for Members on all sides of the House today in offering to Japanese Canadians the formal and sincere apology...
of this Parliament for those past injustices against them, against their families, and against their heritage, and our solemn commitment and undertaking to Canadians of every origin that such violations will never again in this country be countenanced or repeated.

On that day, the Japanese Canadian Redress Agreement was also signed. It consisted of:

$21,000 for each individual Japanese Canadian who had been either expelled from the (west) coast in 1942 or was alive in Canada before April 1, 1949 and remained alive at the time of the signing of the agreement;

• a community fund of $12 million to rebuild the infrastructure of the destroyed communities;

• pardons for those wrongfully convicted of disobeying orders under the War Measures Act;

• recognition of the Canadian citizenship of those wrongfully deported to Japan and their descendants; and

• funding of $24 million for a Canadian Race Relations Foundation that supports projects, programs and conferences that promotes racial equality.¹
Reactions to the apology and redress agreement

The following is a sample of responses to the Canadian government’s apology and redress agreement from prominent members of the Japanese Canadian community.

On September 22, 1988, Canada’s Judo King, Mas Takahashi, said on Parliament Hill,

I feel I’ve just had a tumour removed.2

Writer Arthur Miki said,

As I listened to the carefully chosen words of the Prime Minister’s speech announcing the Redress Agreement negotiated with the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC), memories of the five years of the redress campaign flashed through my mind—the struggle within the Japanese Canadian community, the struggle with the Government and five successive Ministers of State for Multiculturalism, and the struggle to win the approval of the Canadian public. The redress issue became a test for all of us who were involved in the NAJC. Would we be able to take and maintain a strong position on redress, and would we be able to persist until our goal of a “just and honourable” settlement was achieved?3

Albert Lo, chairperson of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation remarked,

The Japanese Canadian Redress Agreement represents a milestone in the history of our country, in which the human rights violations Canada committed in the past were acknowledged… It constituted a model on which other Redress Agreements with Chinese Canadians, Aboriginal peoples who attended Residential Schools, and affected communities acknowledged through this Government’s Community Historical Recognition Programme, have built… The celebration of this remarkable achievement allows us to continue to remember the past and to acknowledge the historical injustices and racism which were sanctioned [allowed] by the state.4

Mickey Nakashima, member of the British Columbia Japanese Canadian Citizens’ Association, reflects on what it meant to the Japanese community when he said,

The acknowledgement, apology and symbolic compensation to those who were eligible and still living meant that the burden of shame and presumed guilt that issei [Japanese term for the first Japanese immigrants to North America] and nisei [Japanese term for the children of the first Japanese immigrants to North America] had carried for years was lifted. We were finally absolved of [freed from] any wrongdoing. The greatest regret was for the issei of my parents’ generation who had died without witnessing Redress.5

4 25th Anniversary of the Japanese Canadian Redress Agreement, Canadian Race Relations Foundation.