

Response to the Komagata Maru incident



Background Briefs

Historic injustices and redress in Canada



Jaswinder Singh Toor, the president of the Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society, a leading organization that pushed for redress from the federal government.
Source: Jason Payne/PNG.

The movement for redress and early government responses

In 2006, the government of Canada responded to calls to redress (make up for past wrongs) historical injustices involving immigration and wartime discrimination. A program was created to fund projects for communities linked to unfair wartime practices and immigration restrictions. The announcement was made on June 23, 2006. This coincided with Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology in the House of Commons for the Chinese head tax. On August 6, 2006, Prime Minister Harper made a speech at the Ghadri Babiyan da Mela (an Indo-Canadian community festival) in Surrey, BC, where he stated that the government of Canada was aware that the *Komagata Maru* incident was wrong and that the government was committed to discussing with the Indo-Canadian community how best to recognize this tragic episode in Canada's history.

Increased pressure put on government from Indo-Canadian community groups to go beyond words and to take action led other politicians to take up the struggle to obtain redress. On April 3, 2008, Ruby Dhalla, MP for Brampton-Springdale,

introduced a motion in the House of Commons which read "That, in the opinion of the House, the government should officially apologize to the Indo-Canadian community and to the individuals impacted in the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident, in which passengers were prevented from landing in Canada." Following further debate on May 15, 2008, the House of Commons passed Dhalla's motion.

On August 3, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized for the *Komagata Maru* incident at the 13th annual Ghadri Babiyan Da Mela in Surrey, BC.

On May 10, 2008, Jason Kenney, Secretary of State (for Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity) offered \$2.5 million in grants and funding to recognize the *Komagata Maru* incident. These grants were available to members of the Indo-Canadian community to develop projects and initiatives that would honour those who experienced injustice as a result of the incident.

Reactions to the apology and redress agreement

In response to the prime minister's historic apology, Jack Uppal, one of the most recognized and highly respected figures in Canada's Indo-Canadian community, said:

Under the leadership of this Prime Minister, this government apologized for the historic injustice of the *Komagata Maru*. That apology was given in my house, my backyard, the place where the incident took place. I accepted the apology; the matter of an apology is closed. The *Komagata Maru* was a tragic incident in Canada's history, but this government has made



remarkable efforts to right the wrong. From the Prime Minister's public apology, to the Minister of Immigration's establishment of the Komagata Maru Canadian historical recognition program, which has funded a significant number of educational projects, museums and memorials across the country, this government is to be commended for its approach to reconciling [correcting] a dark stain in our history.¹

However, on Sunday, August 3, 2008, the Canadian Press announced "Sikhs don't accept apology for *Komagata Maru*." The article went on to say:

Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized Sunday for the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident in which hundreds of Indians seeking a better life in Canada were turned away. Mr. Harper was speaking to a crowd of about 8,000 people in Surrey, BC, which has a large East Indian community. But as soon as he left the stage, members of the Sikh community rushed to the

podium immediately denouncing the apology. They said they wanted it delivered on the floor of the House of Commons.²

Jaswinder Singh Toor, president of the Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society, said:

The apology was unacceptable ... We were expecting the prime minister of Canada to do the right thing. The right thing was ... like the Chinese head tax [referring to Mr. Harper's full apology to the Chinese-Canadian community in 2006 for the head tax imposed on Chinese immigrants].³

Following Mr. Harper's speech, Sikh community leaders asked the crowd for a show of hands on whether or not to accept the apology. Then they announced that the gathering had rejected it. "The apology has been given and it won't be repeated," said Secretary of State Jason Kenney, who was accompanying Mr. Harper during his visit.⁴



The unveiling of a memorial that recognizes the hardships suffered by passengers on the *Komagata Maru*.
Source: Komagata Maru Memorial Helps Heal Century-old Wounds, *Metro*, July 23, 2012.

¹ Cited by Tim Uppal, Minister of State, House of Commons Debates, *Hansard*, May 18, 2012.

² Jeremy Hainsworth, Sikhs don't accept apology for *Komagata Maru*, *The Canadian Press*, August 3, 2008.

³ Harper Apologizes in B.C. for 1914 *Komagata Maru* Incident, CBC News (posted August 3, 2008).

⁴ Harper Apologizes in B.C. for 1914 *Komagata Maru* Incident, CBC News (posted August 3, 2008).



Government apology and the redress agreement

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's federal apology for the 1914 Komagata Maru incident

Good afternoon, *Bonne après-midi* (good afternoon), *Sat Sri Akaal* (a greeting used by Sikhs), *Nameste* (hello in Hindi), *As-Salāmu Alaykum* (a greeting used by Muslims). Thank you, Jason, for that introduction. Greetings to my colleagues, Nina Grewal, Jim Abbot, and Russ Heaper, and fellow Canadians. I'd like to begin today by thanking the president of the Mohan Singh Memorial Foundation, Sahib Thind, for inviting me once again to this spectacular showcase of Punjabi culture. The vibrant dance and musical traditions, exquisite art and timeless literature being celebrated here today are the fruits of a millennial old civilization whose influence spans the globe. Canada now shares this rich cultural legacy; it has become an integral part of our own cultural diversity. [French translation] Today over one million Canadians are of South Asian descent. These hard-working men and women passionately devoted to their families and communities are helping make our country even stronger for the generations yet to come, our country that affords opportunity to all, regardless of their background, our country that offers sanctuary to victims of violence and persecution, our country of freedom and democracy, of prosperity and peace, second to none in the world. As Canadians we have before us, and before our children and grandchildren, a future of literally unlimited possibility. A lot of that promise stems from the confidence, the ideas, and the energies brought here by successive waves of newcomers drawn to our shores by the promise of a new and better life. Canada is renowned the world over for its welcoming embrace of immigrants. But like all countries, our record isn't perfect. We haven't always lived up to our own ideals. One such failure, as has been mentioned, was the detention and turning away of the *Komagata Maru* in 1914, an event that caused much hardship for its passengers, 376 subjects of the British crown from Punjab, and which for many of them ended in terrible tragedy. Two years ago, I stood before you and made a commitment and since then, we have acted on that.

This May the Government of Canada secured passage of the unanimous motion in the House of Commons recognizing the *Komagata Maru* tragedy and apologizing to those who were directly affected. Today, on behalf of the Government of Canada. [Harper pauses to drink water]. Today, on behalf of the Government of Canada, I am officially conveying as Prime Minister that apology. Now friends, many Canadians have worked long and hard to secure recognition for this historic event. I'd like to thank from this community, the Professor Mohan Singh Foundation, the Khalsa Diwan Society, the *Komagata Maru* Descendants Association, and Community Leader, Tarlok Sablok, for their persistent and passionate dedication to this issue over the years. I also wish to acknowledge, I also wish to acknowledge my own colleagues, Nina and Gurmant Grewal, Parliamentary Secretary Jim Abbot, and Minister Jason Kenney for the work they have done to help all Canadians come to terms with this sad chapter in our history. We cannot change the events of the past; we cannot undo the misdeeds committed against those long deceased. But we can bring Canadians together in the present to unite our country, and to set us on a course to accomplish greater things in the future. In closing, I'd like to once again thank the organizers of this event for inviting me to once again be part of this tremendous festival. One of the most rewarding things about being Prime Minister is being able to travel across our great country and to meet the hard-working men and women of all faiths and cultures who are making Canada such a success. We should all be proud of our country and of each other and work together to build an even stronger Canada for all of us. Please enjoy the rest of the festivities. Thank you. *Merci beaucoup*. God bless our land.

