DOES HISTORY MEAN ALWAYS HAVING TO SAY YOU'RE SORRY?

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with one intersection of public policy with history: the recent tendency for governments, in Canada and elsewhere, to apologize for the wrongs of the past. This contrasts with the former exclusive emphasis by governments on celebratory commemorations. The author contends that both trends may oversimplify or misrepresent historical events or themes, but that possibility does not preclude learning from examination of these interpretations and their use of evidence.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce texte examine un des croisements de la politique publique et de l'histoire: la récente tendance des gouvernements, au Canada et ailleurs, d'émettre une apologie pour les injustices passées. Ceci s'oppose à l'accent traditionnel mis par les gouvernements sur les célébrations commémoratives. L'auteur suggère que ces deux tendances peuvent trop simplifier ou mal représenter les événements ou thèmes historiques, mais cette possibilité ne devrait pas nous empêcher d'apprendre de l'examen de ces interprétations et de leur utilisation des faits.

Once upon a time, national governments in Canada and elsewhere tended to regard history, when they considered it at all, as an inspirational story of collective accomplishments. Noteworthy anniversaries were marked by patriotic ceremonies and popular celebrations of the glorious past. Awkward complications or contradictions were ignored, downplayed or treated as proof of modern superiority. As part of this process, political leaders would make solemn speeches, while documents with "background information" or educational materials were distributed. For government publicists, teachers and their students were key audiences.

Overall, the messages tended to be celebratory and uncritical. A similar spirit animated citizenship guides and other official publications about Canada's history. As the recent attention to the centenaries of Canada's foreign ministry and its naval service attest, such commemorations remain popular ways to highlight the contributions of national institutions. Past celebrations sometimes attracted critics and nay-sayers who dissented from the overall mood of satisfaction and pride, but those discordant voices rarely spoiled the party.

For many years, what governments generally did not do was apologise for past policies and/or their consequences. That is not to say that governments were depicted or regarded as perfect. However, compensation for injustice, whether for individuals or groups, was left for the courts or for tribunals such as royal commissions to assess, with governments simply complying with their findings. Only in exceptional circumstances, as with the conduct of Germany and Japan in the Second World War, was there an expectation, in Canada or elsewhere, of national accountability and official contrition. In other words, it was generally regarded as inappropriate for a current government to condemn, explicitly or implicitly, a former government for its actions and to legislate restitution, financial or otherwise, for those represented as victims of past decisions. Responsibility for historic wrongs could neither be inherited nor redeemed by a successor.

Perhaps the most outspoken expression of that attitude in Canada came from a Liberal prime minister whose remarks often provoked controversy, Pierre Elliott Trudeau. In response to a public campaign, Trudeau

expressed regret for the experience of Japanese Canadians who were interned during the Second World War but insisted that the government could not correct all past injustices, including those of the colonial period, so that it would be invidious and inappropriate to offer an official apology and redress in any one case. "I do not think it is the purpose of a government to right the past," he stated on his last day in Parliament as prime minister. "I cannot rewrite history."[1] That attitude could easily be misconstrued as indifference by the majority, as represented by the government, to the experience of minorities, so that his tart comments simply rekindled the debate over redress.

Trudeau's Progressive Conservative successor, Brian Mulroney, reversed this stance. Shortly after American president Ronald Reagan had made an equivalent pronouncement, the Canadian prime minister declared his government's intent to apologize and later to compensate those who had been interned. "We have all learned from personal experience," Mulroney contended, "that as inadequate as apologies are they are the only way we can cleanse the past so that we may, as best we can, in good conscience face the future."[2] In the event, it took four years before a deal was negotiated and the prime minister made the formal statement in the House of Commons. Still later, the Canadian Race Relations Foundation was established by the government of Jean Chrétien as one aspect of the accord, though its mandate was explicitly not linked to the treatment of one community.

Mulroney had stressed the exceptional nature of the wartime internment of Japanese Canadians and associated measures and he insisted that the settlement which he had announced would be "the only and last one."[3] With that precedent, however, it was likely inevitable that other groups would emulate the approach of the National Association of Japanese Canadians. The most prominent of these petitions for remedial action were: the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, about the registration, disfranchisement and internment of approximately 5,000 Canadians of Ukrainian background in the First World War as "enemy aliens" from the Austro-Hungarian empire; the National Congress of Italian Canadians, with respect to the "shameful" internment of 600 "politically unsophisticated people from 'all walks of life'"[4] in the Second World War; and the Chinese Canadian National Council, concerning the "racist legislation" which imposed a head tax on all immigrants to Canada of Chinese origin from 1885 to 1923.

The disgraceful treatment of native students in residential schools, which was illuminated over the years by former students and aboriginal groups and which elicited a formal government apology in 1998, more recently prompted not only another apology, financial compensation and healing measures for survivors but also the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. "Canada is now coming to terms with its dark past," observed National Chief Phil Fontaine of the Assembly of First Nations on the eve of the prime minister's apology in June 2008, "a past that's been covered up and hidden from its own citizens."[5]

The Canadian examples were part of a global trend, not parochial phenomena. "An outbreak of apology has swept the globe," an American professor of philosophy observed in October 2000.[6] That observation was prompted by a series of apologies, including President Bill Clinton's for slavery, Prime Minister Tony Blair's for British policy during the Irish potato famine, Queen Elizabeth's for British treatment of the Maoris of New Zealand, Japan's for its exploitation and abuse of Korean "comfort women" in the Second World War, as well as the Canadian apologies to the Japanese Canadians and to indigenous peoples. Since then, there have been further successful campaigns abroad to extract apologies and redress from governments over past policies, including the "home children" in the United Kingdom and Australia. "Public apologies and gestures of regret became more frequent over the second half of the twentieth century and continue to be offered in the early years of the twenty-first," as one analyst noted.[7] Michael Marrus has memorably referred to "the temper of our time of millenarian contrition" and justifiably stressed the need to distinguish between the "trivial and highly consequential."[8]

In each of the Canadian campaigns, the advocates marshalled evidence of past injustice and justification for present redress, with a particular emphasis in their strategy on persuading politicians and political parties. Research on these questions was almost invariably left to the respective crusades and occasional scholars, some of whom disputed the proof and the motivations ascribed to past authorities.

In spite of questions thus raised, there does not appear to have been a significant effort or disposition on the part of governments to investigate or to contest the various claims. That attitude tacitly acknowledged that, ultimately, the verdicts were political, not legal or historical. Moreover, a political consensus gradually developed in favour of apology and redress for earlier misdeeds which crossed party lines.

After more than two decades of consideration, this revisionist trend culminated in the Community Historical Recognition Program, announced in June 2006 by Prime Minister Stephen Harper when he apologized for the head tax and initiated symbolic payments to head tax payers and surviving partners of deceased payers. In an effort "to formally turn the page on an unfortunate period in

Canada's past," the government would "establish funds to help finance community projects aimed at acknowledging the impact of past wartime measures and immigration restrictions on ethno-cultural communities."[9] That program was elaborated two years later by the secretary of state for multiculturalism and Canadian identity, Jason Kenney, with particular reference to the experience of prospective immigrants and refugees from China, India and Jewish communities in Europe, as well as the internment of Ukrainian Canadians.[10] The laudable goal articulated by Kenney was that "all Canadians" should "understand our history, including the more difficult periods." With that in mind, the principal aims of the program were acknowledgement, commemoration and education, rather than compensation or redress.[11]

Earlier this year, the House of Commons passed a private member's bill calling for a formal apology to Italian Canadians for internment during the Second World War and for establishment of a commemorative and educational fund of $2.5 million.[12] The fact that government Members of Parliament opposed the bill and that Canadian and international scholars regarded the "blanket apology to Italian Canadians for the 'wrongs' committed to them" as mistaken, indicates that there are significant doubts about whether all such claims are valid. As Franco Iacovetta and Roberto Perin observed a decade ago, "current debates on internment generate much emotion but are often woefully uninformed by history."[13]

Meanwhile, there has been much attention in academe and in the media to what one scholar has called *The Politics of Official Apologies* and a journalist has described aptly as "a delicate art."[14] With the abundance of recent official pronouncements worldwide, teachers and students of history could have been forgiven for concluding that the past is an inventory of errors and wrongs. Yet there are still national commemorations of anniversaries associated with worthy institutions or significant achievements which adopt a more eulogistic tone.

As with most attempts to depict complex events simply, both tendencies may imperfectly depict the past. However, that issue of interpretations itself may provide an opportunity to explore in the classroom and outside it some familiar preoccupations of historians: the importance of context; the evaluation of evidence; the need for critical scrutiny of perspectives and motivations; the often awkward intersection between group and national (or international) consciousness; and, the relationship between an understanding of the past and conduct in the present. There are also vital associated questions of justice and dignity for those to whom apologies may be addressed.

Perhaps the best way to examine and evaluate the issues surrounding apologies and redress in the classroom would be to borrow a technique employed in the study of international relations, among other disciplines – the "case study" method. That would prompt questions about the justification or evidence employed for each claim, as well as consideration of the context and the content of the original decision-making, including purposes and anticipated results, as well as the validity and likely impact of remedial action. It could also demonstrate that these questions are complicated and that consequently the answers are not simple. Some of the writings on the overall theme, as well as the scholarship on specific cases, could be used in this evaluation.

Statistics could be analysed for comparisons. Thus, for each wartime example, what percentage of the community then resident in Canada was subjected to internment or other "anti-alien" measures? That is, was the action directed arbitrarily and universally at an entire group or was it applied selectively? If the latter, then what criteria may have been employed for selection? These factual questions are essential for any assessment of decision-making, including an examination of the intent of policy-makers and the consequences of their decisions.

There are also important points of interpretation, not only of the policies adopted but also of alternatives which may have been worse. The head tax on Chinese immigrants was repugnant, but it was then the price of admission to Canada. It was replaced by outright exclusion. How could one fairly compensate those who could not afford to be admitted in one era or those who were later denied entry?

Undoubtedly, teachers, the general public and policy-makers can all benefit from a better understanding of past decisions and their implications. A principal purpose of this exercise should be to learn from the past and, one hopes, to avoid similar mistakes or errors in the present and the future. Learning must begin with an appreciation of the complexity and uncertainty of history.

Please note that a web search would generate considerable hits of postings from newspapers and magazines, as well as from the organisations involved in the quests for apologies, so that this topic could also be employed to highlight the possibilities as well as the pitfalls of on-line research for the study of history and contemporary politics.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING (IN ADDITION TO WORKS CITED IN THE NOTES):

Patrick Martin, "When is an apology not enough? or too much?" *The Globe and Mail*, 12 June 2008 (posted on website).

Frances Swyripa and John Herd Thompson, eds., *Loyalties in Conflict: Ukrainians in Canada During the Great War* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1983).

NOTES

[1] Quoted in Mitch Miyagawa, "A Sorry State," *The Walrus,* December 2009. "It is our purpose to be just in our time," Trudeau added, "and that is what we have done in bringing in the Charter of Rights."

[2] *House of Commons Debates,* 22 September 1988.

[3] Statement by Brian Mulroney paraphrased in Jeffrey Simpson, "Sorry to say, but the apology-seeking industry is thriving," *The Globe and Mail*, 20 May 2008.

[4] Franco Iacovetta and Roberto Perin, "Introduction: Italians and Internment" in Franco Iacovetta, Roberto Perin, and Angelo Principe, eds., *Enemies Within: Italian and Other Internees in Canada and Abroad* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 6.

[5] Quoted in Anne McIlroy and Bill Curry, "97 years later, apology at last," *The Globe and Mail,* 9 June 2008.

[6] Janna Thompson, "The Apology Paradox," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 201 (October 2000), 470-5.

[7] Melissa Nobles, *The Politics of Official Apologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

[8] Michael R. Marrus, "Official Apologies and the Quest for Historical Justice," Occasional Paper No. III (2006), Munk Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto, 2.

[9] "Address by the Prime Minister on the Chinese Head Tax Redress," 22 June 2006; "PM Addresses Head Tax and lauds accomplishments of Chinese Canadians," 10 October 2006. The texts of both speeches are posted on the website of the Prime Minister of Canada.

[10] One prominent columnist questioned the validity and purpose of this emphasis. Jeffrey Simpson, "Sorry to say, but the apology-seeking industry is thriving," *The Globe and Mail*, 20 May 2008. On the announcements which prompted Simpson's comments, see news releases in following note and the following articles: Omar el Akkad, "Ottawa rolls out string of apologies: Conservatives earmark $29 million to atone for wrongdoings" and Robert Matas and Justine Hunter, "'It's a shameful part of our history'" in *The Globe and Mail*, 14 May 2008.

[11] Canadian Heritage, News Release, 8 May 2008: "The Government of Canada Promotes Historical Recognition for Chinese-Canadian Community's Immigration Experiences." See also news releases from the same department for 9 May 2008 (Ukrainian-Canadian Community) and 10 May 2008 (Indo-Canadian Community).

[12] The bill passed by a vote of 143-134 on 28 April 2010. In November 2005, then Prime Minister Paul Martin and Minister of Immigration and Citizenship Joe Volpe had pledged the same amount, without an apology, only weeks before a general election in which the government was defeated. Fifteen years earlier, Mulroney had apologized informally at a banquet, but there had been no official statement or compensation package.

[13] "MP's vote for apology to Italian-Canadians, but Tories opposed," *The Canadian Press*, 28 April 2010; Iacovetta, Perin and Principe, *Enemies Within*, especially the preface and introduction. Of those interned, about 100 were seamen from Italy who were in Canadian waters when Canada declared war on Italy on 10 June 1940. The approximately 500 others were drawn from a population of 112,625 Italian Canadians. The most thorough and dispassionate analysis of the internees and of the context for the internment may be found in an excellent article by Luigi Bruti Liberati, "The Internment of Italian Canadians," in *Enemies Within*, 76-98. Liberati concludes that, though some mistakes may have been made in identifying individuals, the actions of Canadian authorities were neither arbitrary nor directed at the Italian Canadian community as a whole.

[14] Melissa Nobles, *The Politics of Official Apologies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jim Bronskill, "Political apologies: a delicate art," The Globe and Mail, 24 April 2010.