

DILEMMAS: REDRESSING HISTORY'S HORRORS

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INTENDED GRADE/SUBJECT AREA

Grades 11 & 12 History, Law, English, Creative Writing, Drama, Computer Technology
(While the issues addressed are complex and difficult, with some slight adjustments and modification, the lesson might also be used in grades 9 & 10.)

CONCEPTS

- Rights and responsibilities, uses and abuses of history, the legitimacy of historical compensation. The era, depending on the specific issues selected, runs the length of Canadian history, however, most of the examples would come from 1900 to present day.
- Innovative strategies employed include going outside the classroom by lobbying governments and NGOs; cross-disciplinary.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The issue of one generation attempting to address the perceived wrongs of an earlier era is one fraught with complexity and difficulty. There are few, if any, absolutes; no black or white. Rather, the closest we can come to the truth is in various shades of gray. History is vital in the process of identifying legitimate groups who merit consideration.

However, even when history points out groups that have suffered, through no fault of their own, immense problems arise. Can one generation – or government – collectively apologize and/or compensate on behalf of a preceding generation? If one group receives compensation, then what precedent has been established for other groups to demand the same? How then, do you begin to equate suffering and loss in the past? Is it, indeed, even possible? Can a price tag ever be reasonably put on a group's suffering and loss? These are just a few of some of the issues and values that must be addressed to arrive at a universally satisfactory resolution.

This lesson, while scarcely being definitive, will allow students to begin to explore the difficulty and the uncertainty underlying these very fundamental issues and values. After going through the lesson(s), not only will they become better acquainted with the specifics of an individual group's claims, they will gain a greater appreciation of the way in which history can be used to help resolve highly controversial and complex problems.

The length of time taken will vary with the option(s) selected by the teacher. It could simply be a one-class lesson that touches on some of the central concerns and examples. Or it could be expanded into many classes involving individual and group research and presentations. The marks allocated will obviously vary with the length of time spent and the degree of difficulty demanded. In the former case, it might be 5% while in the latter case it could be a full ISU (Independent Study Unit) or summative assignment and therefore out of 20-25%.

INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES

Students will:

- gain knowledge/awareness of some of the “black marks” of Canadian and world history
- detect bias
- evaluate claims
- critically analyze an article
- enhance writing skills
- enhance research skills
- design an engaging and compelling presentation
- decide how best to lobby government(s)
- write a Critical Book Review (optional)

ACTIVITIES

Main Activity

Students read C. Moore’s article “Redressing History’s Horrors” (*The Beaver*, April/May 2003)

Questions to consider:

1. What is Moore’s thesis?
2. What evidence does he provide to support it?
3. Do you find his thesis credible? Why or why not?
4. What examples of “victims” does he provide?
5. What are some of the difficulties that he points out in “redressing history’s horrors?”
6. What are the implications if Moore is right?
7. What, according to Moore, is the worst thing that can be done in cases of compensation for historical wrongs? Why?

This activity should take about one class. It should be concluded with a homework assignment asking students to write a letter of reaction (an expanded version of point 3) to Moore.

If this is going to be a major unit of study, then it might be advantageous to have students expand their knowledge and insight into the topic by having them read and then write a Critical Book Review of one of the five book suggestions at the end of Moore’s article. If this option is chosen, allow about one month, but virtually all of the time would be spent out-of-class, other than perhaps one or two periods when the teacher talks to each student about their progress and reaction to the book they are reading.

Optional Activities

A. Critical Book Review Outline

- Read the book while taking notes, both on the book’s content as well as its argument. Note points of agreement and disagreement. Note strengths and weaknesses.
- The review should have a one-paragraph introduction that sets the context for the book and should be followed by a synopsis of the book (1 – 2 pages).
- The bulk of the review should be devoted to a critical assessment of the book (thesis, bias, research, organization, style, etc.)

- The review should close with a forceful conclusion commenting on the book's overall strength (or weakness) as well as its relevance for students to read.

B. Divide the class up into various groups, of between two and four members, to research and then to present the results of their research to the class. Each group will select a group that has been advanced as have a legitimate claim for redress and compensation because of treatment it was accorded in the past. Depending on the nature of the course as well as the expectations of the teacher, these groups might be exclusively Canadian, or they could include global examples as well.

CANADIAN EXAMPLES

- Japanese-Canadians interned in World War II
- Children in residential schools
- The Métis
- Chinese Canadians (in the era of Head Tax, building the railroads, etc.)
- The *Komagata Maru*
- The Wrongfully Convicted (Marshall, Milgaard, Morin, Phillion, etc.)
Note: each could be examined separately.
- Ukrainian-Canadians of World War I
- Victims of sexual abuse
- Dispossessed aboriginals of the late 19th century
- 19th century union organizers
- Victims of the McGill experiments of the 1950s and 1960s
- Blacks in Canada
- Hong Kong veterans of 1941-45

GLOBAL EXAMPLES

- Victims of:
 - The Holocaust in Germany
 - The Intafada in the Middle East
 - Apartheid in South Africa
 - American policy in Vietnam (1959-75)
 - Idi Amin in Uganda
 - Pol Pot in Cambodia
 - Tiennamen Square
 - 9-11
 - The "Stalin famine"
 - Kosovo
 - Child Labour
 - More specifically:
 - Israeli victims of PLO suicide bombers
 - Iraqi victims of the Gulf War
 - African American victims of segregation

Students may also choose their own example in consultation with the instructor.

Each group will then thoroughly research their topic. Issues to consider:

1. What was the time period?
2. Are you imposing your contemporary values on an earlier time?
3. Should the current generation be burdened with compensating for the policies and actions of an earlier generation?
4. What losses did the group/individual suffer?
5. What were the consequences of suffering that loss?
6. How does their suffering compare to that of other groups who have already received compensation?
7. Is it possible to quantify the suffering and loss?
8. Who was at fault?
9. What do you think should be done to redress these victims? Why?
10. What difficulties are there in taking the redress approach that you recommend? Explain.

Each group will make a PowerPoint® presentation summarizing their findings and deliver it to the class. The presentation should be between five and ten minutes. The presentation will be marked out of 100, with equal allocations for research, delivery, organization, technical, and creativity. Following each presentation, the class will debate with the presenters on the merits of that particular group receiving compensation.

At the end of the presentation, the class will decide which of the groups made the strongest case. The job then of the entire class was to formulate a strategy plan of how to actually go about lobbying – and attaining – compensation for that particular group. (Who should be contacted? The government? United Nations? International Court of Justice? Nongovernmental organizations? etc.) In what way? What method of contact should be used? What strategies and techniques should be used? etc.)

C. By way of a final evaluation (earlier ones included the response to Moore, the optional Critical Book Review, the PowerPoint Presentation), students will write a formal, 2000-word thematic essay entitled “Redressing History’s Horrors: The Political and Moral Dilemmas.” (Note, while they can use arguments and information from their own group’s research, they should include as many pertinent examples as possible.)

D. Appendix: See Nick Brune’s article entitled *Compensating Japanese-Canadians is good, but it opens up Pandora’s Box*. As part of the overall assignment, have students compile a list of various articles on the topic.

About the Educator

Nick Brune has written history textbooks, videos, teaching packages and articles. He has given workshops and presentations throughout Canada. He has been the educational writer for the award-winning CBC-TV News in Review that reaches over two million students across Canada. His passion for the discipline and study of history is both evident and contagious. The integrity of history, he believes, demands that students discover not only what happened and why, but its importance and how it speaks to their own lives.

Appendix

“Compensating Japanese-Canadians is good, but it opens up Pandora’s Box.”

This article originally appeared in the column Insight in what was formerly named The Kitchener-Waterloo Record (now The Record), October 11, 1988, p. A7.

By Nick Brune

To argue against compensation for the Japanese-Canadians would appear to run counter to our sense of justice and fair play. Nobody would dispute that 22,000 individuals suffered after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor.

Worse was the fact that 17,000 of those Japanese-Canadians who lost their businesses, homes and property and were interned in camps were Canadian citizens. The American government went through the same debate and announced it would give \$20,000 to each Japanese-American.

However, as appealing as it may be to some to award \$288 million to those living Japanese-Canadians—which works out to \$21,000 per person—the policy is wrong-headed and badly misses the mark. That conclusion is reached not because the Japanese-Canadians did not suffer horrendously. That conclusion is the only logical one when one assesses the situation from a number of perspectives.

When Japan attacked the American Sixth Fleet at Pearl Harbor on Dec.7, 1941, it produced a wave of panic on Canada’s West Coast. All Japanese-Canadians were thought to harbor subversive ideas and many were on the verge of betraying Canada to the Axis.

To counteract the wave of hysteria and some argued or rationalized to protect the Japanese-Canadian community—the Mackenzie King government responded. All members of that community lost their property, homes and businesses. In addition to confiscating their possessions, the government also rounded up all Japanese-Canadians and put them in detention and work camps in isolated areas in the interior of the country.

In the course of dispatching them, families were on occasion arbitrarily split up. Undeniable, the government of the day, operating under a siege mentality, over-reacted terribly.

However, it is wrong for the Mulroney government of today to offer an official policy and financial compensation in an attempt to redress this historical wrong. What right does it have to assume this great mantle of responsibility? How can one government or one generation collectively apologize or compensate a preceding generation?

Prime Minister Mulroney is taking on an obligation that he has no business assuming. That is not to deny that an injustice was perpetuated. However, other injustices have taken place and they have not warranted compensation—or even attention.

In announcing the compensation plan, Multiculturalism Minister Gerry Weiner argued that what happened to the Japanese-Canadians in 1942-49 was “unique and unparalleled.” He added that there had “never been an episode like it in post-Confederation politics.” Weiner is engaging in either hyperbole or rationalization. It may, as some have intimated, be a rather weak attempt to provide a veneer of legitimacy for what may in essence be a case of crass political opportunism at its worst. Are we so naïve as to smugly conclude that the timing of the announcement in advance of an election call is coincidence? Even suspending judgment on that issue, Weiner’s misreading of history is based either on ignorance or wishful thinking. What happened to the Japanese-Canadians is not as qualitatively unique as Weiner suggests.

Approximately 5,000 Ukrainian immigrants, most of whom were naturalized, were removed from their farms and towns in Western Canada and transported to work camps in eastern Canada during the First World War. Their homes and property, like that of the Japanese-Canadians, were confiscated and sold by the government.

That same war witnessed other instances of discrimination. They varied greatly. More than 80,000 Ruthenians, many of whom were Ukrainian-Canadians, were forced to register as enemy aliens. The playing of German composers, from Beethoven to Brahms, was banned. Berlin, Ontario, became Kitchener, Ontario.

When the Chinese were brought into Canada to work as navies on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, they suffered within the same xenophobic environment that the Japanese would later face.

After the railway was completed in 1885, they attempted lead quiet, hard-working lives. However, the racist society in which they found themselves, would not leave them alone. The policy of discrimination became officially sanctioned in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the government enacted a “head tax” on all Chinese immigrants who came to Canada.

Was the government’s treatment of the Métis—either in Manitoba in 1870 or Saskatchewan 15 years later—so terribly different than what happened to the Japanese-Canadians? One could engage in logically hair-splitting by saying that they weren’t citizens or that they had engaged in treasonous activities. However, despite obvious difference, there is a rough analogy between the two situations. Lubomyr Luciuk, the research director of the Civil Liberties Commission of the Ukrainian-Canadian committee, sums up Weiner’s misreading of history: “If he believes that what happened to Japanese-Canadians is unique, then he’s not very well informed about Canadian history.”

Even aside from the historical perspective, the Mulroney policy is faulty. As the cliché goes: “It’s not the money, it’s the principle.” In this particular case, both money and principle are dead wrong.

It smacks too much of blood money. How can you slap a price tag on something like this? Can any amount of money ever right the injustice? Of course it can’t. It can only be a poor balm to soothe somebody’s fragile conscience.

A formal apology and a firm commitment to learn from the mistake is a viable route to go. But to offer money strikes one, perhaps even some of the recipients, as a cynical conscience payment.

Then there is the very practical problem of precedent. If the case of the Japanese-Canadians is not so unique, then what is to be the response to similarly injured citizens? What do you pay the Ukrainians? The Ruthenians? How much for the Chinese, the Métis and other natives?

Related to that is the question of quantity. If you pay each living Japanese-Canadian \$21,000, what about the estates of those who have died? Why is their claim any less valid? You simply cannot put a price tag on morality any more than you can legislate people to be decent and fair. As Mulroney himself said: "No amount of money can right the wrong." But the financial compensation package is an attempt, implicitly and explicitly, to do so.