

Opinion / Columnists

## Opinion: Italian Canadians are owed compensation, not just apologies

*The passage of time does not relieve the government of duty to make its best efforts to repair harm caused by its admitted rights violation.*

**Ralph Mastromonaco** • Special to Montreal Gazette

April 28, 2021 • 3 minute read



The scales of justice: “How can a society committed to the rule of law and human rights attempt to right a wrong with an apology, yet do nothing to repair the harm caused by that wrong?” Ralph Mastromonaco asks.

PHOTO BY  
DAMIEN MEYER /AFP/Getty  
Images

It should come as no surprise that there have been mixed reactions to the announcement that an official apology for the internment of Italian Canadians during the Second World War will be given by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in May.

Italian Canadians have every right to express how they feel about this development and certainly should not be shamed for failing to express unqualified elation. Some may feel enthusiastic gratitude. Others, however, have the right to express disappointment that a simple apology, unaccompanied by any tangible compensation for the harm that was done, is an insufficient response, given the nature and scope of the injustice committed.

The internment of 600 Italian Canadians during the Second World War was an egregious act of discrimination and contrary to everything Canada stood for then and has stood for since. It had nothing to do with advancing Canada’s legitimate war aim focused on liberating Europe from the tyranny of Nazis and fascists, but had everything to do with xenophobic hatred.

The internment was wrong. It caused unacceptable harm to the internees and significant hardship to those who mattered most in lives of these men: their families. Future generations of Canadians must never forget that our Italian Canadian internees were not one-dimensional caricatures we may read about as a footnote to the historical account of Canada's Second World War experience. They were real living breathing persons, someone's husband, father, son, brother, uncle, nephew or cousin, somebody who loved and was loved.

Jobs were lost, businesses built and properties acquired through honest hard work were confiscated, under an immoral legal pretence, from law-abiding people who committed no crimes. These Italian Canadians were deemed enemies of our country merely because of their Italian heritage.

How can a society committed to the rule of law and human rights attempt to right a wrong with an apology, yet do nothing to repair the harm caused by that wrong?

After five decades, the Japanese Canadian community deservedly received a formal apology from our government and a \$300 million compensation package from the Mulroney Conservative government on Sept. 22, 1988. This package included \$21,000 for each of the 13,000 survivors, \$12 million for a Japanese community fund and \$24 million to create a Canadian race relations foundation aimed at preventing the recurrence of such discrimination.

The Italian Canadian community should not be treated any differently.

On Nov. 4, 1990, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney offered an apology for the internment of Italian Canadians in an address to the National Italian Congress in Toronto. Certainly, it was a gesture of some significance, but it clearly fell short of an official apology delivered by our prime minister in our House of Commons. The Liberal Party has formed the government of Canada for a good many of the 31 years that have passed since Mulroney's first initiative to make things right on this issue. Today's Liberal government has finally taken a step in the right direction. Although the official apology scheduled to be delivered this May is well intentioned and merits a measure of appreciation, it remains nonetheless woefully inadequate on a human rights level.

There is no statute of limitation on a human rights violation that takes a country more than 80 years to finally officially acknowledge and apologize for. The passage of time does not relieve government of its duty to make its best efforts to repair the harm caused by its admitted human rights violation. The passage of time may make the task of determining just reparation challenging, but this is no reason to be deterred from making the effort that will bring our society closer to achieving the true full measure of justice owed to a deserving community.

Our Canada can do better.