



Japanese Canadians and Democratic Rights Case Study

✘ Background information

Japanese Canadians began immigrating to Canada during the last decades of the 19th century, settling primarily in communities along the coastal areas of British Columbia (BC). They found work in the resource industries, such as fishing, farming and logging, and operated small businesses in urban areas.

These immigrants experienced various forms of discrimination and prejudice, based on race and economic factors, from sectors of the general public and the provincial government. This discrimination intensified during the latter part of the 19th century as Japanese Canadians entered the workforce in larger numbers and were seen to be taking jobs away from Caucasian workers. Anti-Asian sentiment, stoked by newspapers and BC politicians, resulted in the passing of laws that took away Japanese Canadians' right to vote provincially in 1895. Japanese Canadians living in BC then lost their right to vote federally in 1920, since the federal law recognized provincial exclusions.

Many Japanese Canadians struggled against this prejudicial treatment and advocated for their right to participate in the democratic process like other citizens. In 1900, Tomekichi Homma launched a legal suit to get on the voters list, and in 1936 a delegation travelled to Ottawa to speak before the House of Commons. These initiatives were met with opposition, especially from BC parliamentarians.

Discrimination against Canadians of Japanese origin intensified when the United States and Canada went to war with Japan following the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941. Along Canada's west coast, the Japanese population came to be seen as a security threat. Many people in BC advocated noisily for something to be done about the risk to national security posed by Japanese Canadians. Eventually responding to these calls, the federal government, under the *War Measures Act*, suspended civil and democratic rights and, in 1942, relocated all Japanese Canadians from the coast of BC. Ironically, the relocation of Japanese Canadians outside BC had the unintended effect of giving them the right to vote in federal elections, as they were no longer subject to BC law. The federal Parliament then took measures to disenfranchise them in 1944.

Japanese Canadians did not regain the right to vote in federal elections until 1948. After years of lobbying for recognition of their treatment, Japanese Canadians received an official apology from the federal government in 1988.

Why were Japanese Canadians discriminated against and denied their democratic rights?

- **Economic fears**

Japanese Canadians seemed willing to work for lower wages, which trade unions and many workers saw as stealing their jobs.

- **Racial prejudice**

There was widespread prejudice against Japanese Canadians because of their perceived foreignness and cultural differences from Canadians of European background.

- **Fear of Japanese militarism**

The brutal struggle with Japan during the Second World War and questions about Japanese Canadian loyalty had the effect of intensifying anti-Japanese sentiment across Canada, especially in BC.

What changed?

- The 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* had an impact in Canada on notions of racial inequality and democratic and civil rights.
- The wartime fear of the Japanese faded after the war ended.
- National ideas about fairness, equality and basic rights of citizens evolved.