

Multiculturalism in Canada—A Historical Perspective

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Canada is renowned as a country that welcomes thousands of immigrants every year and is praised as a success in multiculturalism. But Canada was not always so welcome to immigrants and it has only been 40 years since Canada instituted a non-discriminatory, points-based immigration system. Though Canada was always “multicultural,” the demographic nature of the country took a marked change after 1900. The federal government invited hard-working immigrants from around the world to build the new country. However, the presence of so many Asian immigrants upset many segments of white society in British Columbia. This paper looks at how Canadian politicians justified an exclusionary immigration policy to solve the “problem” of Japanese immigration. This will focus primarily on the Lemieux mission, which was a Canadian diplomatic mission in 1907 aimed at restricting Japanese immigration to Canada.

Background to the Lemieux Mission

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Canada experienced the first major economic and demographic boom in its young history. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Prime Minister from 1896-1911, famously promised that “the 20th century will belong to Canada” and he invited hard-working immigrants from Europe to help him build that dream. There was a hierarchy in the type of immigrant sought. As Canada was a member of the British Empire, white, Protestant Britons were preferred. Northern

Europeans (Scandinavians and Germans), East Europeans, and Ukrainians were actively sought as they had experience in the type of farming required for the vast prairies. Although most immigrants were generally welcome to Canada, skilled labourers, such as engineers, were particularly sought after.

Canadian attitudes to Asian immigrants, however, were generally hostile. While cheap Chinese labour was invaluable in constructing the trans-continental Canadian Pacific Railway that would link the Atlantic with the Pacific, they were no longer welcome to Canada after this project was completed in 1885. Successive Liberal and Conservative governments both imposed restrictions on Chinese immigrants, which, before the Lemieux Mission, culminated in the \$500 “head tax” of 1903. For Chinese labourers, this was equivalent to two years’ salary and effectively barred their entry to Canada. Most Japanese immigrants went to Hawaii, but after the Russo-Japanese War, the Meiji Government encouraged emigration to continental North America.⁽¹⁾ By 1907, nearly one-quarter of British Columbia’s population, the Canadian province bordering the Pacific, was of Asian descent.

With more and more Asians living in British Columbia, politicians there became more vocal in demanding a “White Man’s Province.” Several politicians and journalists claimed active membership in anti-Asian groups, such as the “Asiatic Exclusion League.” At the turn of the 20th century, the majority of B.C.’s white population was British-born or of British descent and they were strong pro-British imperialists. The B.C. provincial government routinely passed anti-Asian legislation, aimed at restricting their entry in the province or barring them from employment in certain sectors of industry. The federal government in Ottawa often

had to declare such legislation unconstitutional, not because it believed the legislation was discriminatory, but because it would upset Great Britain. ⁽²⁾

Great Britain's diplomatic rapprochement with the Meiji government complicated matters for British imperialists in Canada. In 1894, the British and Japanese governments signed the historic Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Commerce and Navigation [hereinafter "Anglo-Japanese Treaty"], which began the process of reversing the unequal treaties. The first article of the treaty stipulated that subjects of either country would "have full liberty to enter, travel, or reside in any part of the dominions and possessions of the other Contracting Party, and shall enjoy full and perfect protection for their persons and properties." ⁽³⁾ The British colonies were invited to join the 1894 treaty but Canada decided not to. Japan and Great Britain became stronger allies after they signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902. Even though Canada did not join that the Anglo-Japanese Treaty until 1906, Sir Wilfrid Laurier's government disallowed B.C.'s anti-Asian statutes to avoid embarrassing Great Britain and its new important ally, Japan. ⁽⁴⁾

After the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and Japan's military victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, the Laurier government decided it was time to forge closer ties with Japan, the newest member of the Great Powers circle. The British Foreign Secretary allowed the Canadian government to join the existing 1894 Anglo-Japanese Treaty if it desired. However the Foreign Office reminded Laurier that the Treaty would not change and that "Japanese subjects" would have "full liberty" to enter Canada. ⁽⁵⁾

Laurier knew that "unrestricted Japanese immigration" would not be popular in B.C. so he met the Japanese Consul-General in Ottawa, Nosse

Tatsugoro. Laurier asked Nosse for a promise that Japanese immigrants would not be flooding into Canada, especially B.C. Nosse assured Laurier in May 1905 that “the Japanese government will always adhere to their policy of voluntary restrictions on their people emigrating to British Columbia.”⁽⁶⁾ Nosse was referring to the Meiji government’s pre-Russo-Japanese War lukewarm position on emigration to North America (excluding Hawaii). But Nosse never asked the Meiji Government whether this was still official policy. When Canada adhered “without reserve” to the Anglo-Japanese Treaty in 1906, the Consul-General’s promises were not appended or mentioned in the official documents.

In the months following adherence to the treaty, thousands of Japanese arrived in Vancouver. Though some were in transit to the United States and some were returning from a trip to Japan, the sight of so many Japanese angered various sections of British Columbia society. In Vancouver, fears of an “Asiatic invasion” boiled over on 7 September 1907. A mob led by the Asiatic Exclusion League destroyed Chinese and Japanese property in Vancouver and there were many wounded. This became known as the “Vancouver Riot.”⁽⁷⁾ The Japanese Foreign Minister, Hayashi Tadasu, suggested avoiding “the usual diplomatic channels” and hoped Canadian authorities could settle the issue of damages and reparations “independently of the British government.”⁽⁸⁾ Laurier wasted no time in sending his regrets to Consul-General Morikawa in Vancouver and to the Meiji Emperor.

Laurier, however, was not pleased with Consul-General Nosse. “The influx of Oriental labour,” in the popular phrase of the day, clearly violated Nosse’s promises. Laurier made plans to send a diplomatic envoy to Tokyo to negotiate restrictions on Japanese immigration. The Cabinet endorsed

Rodolphe Lemieux as the government's chief envoy. The French-Canadian Lemieux was one of Laurier's most trusted ministers. The object of Lemieux's mission was to obtain written assurances from the Japanese government that they would not allow more than 300 labourers and artisans a year to emigrate to Canada. Even though the first article of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty stated that the Japanese enjoyed "full and perfect protection for their persons and properties," and that the race riot had been caused by Canadian and American agitators, by sending Lemieux on his mission, Laurier essentially shifted the blame to the Japanese. In Laurier's opinion, it was the large "unassimilable" Japanese presence in Canada that had caused the riot, not the violent activities of the white nativists.

The Lemieux Mission, November – December 1907

Lemieux set sail for Yokohama on 29 October 1907. During his trans-Pacific voyage, Lemieux prepared for his meeting with the Foreign Ministry by reading a confidential report on the situation in B.C. written for the Canadian Minister of the Interior, Frank Oliver. The report had a major impact on Lemieux's thinking on racial matters in Canada, who had virtually no first-hand knowledge of anything Asian. Lemieux believed that Japanese immigration to Canada, whether large-scale or not, was primarily a racial issue which threatened to destabilize Canadian society. He noted how the Chinese, while paradoxically unwelcome as immigrants, were actually highly desirable workers. Lemieux wrote: "[The] Chinese [were] less objectionable" and "in demand" because they did menial, dirty, and dangerous jobs, which he listed as "domestic servants, laundry men, cooks, labourers in clearing forests, market gardeners, inside workers in canneries and, above ground workers in collieries."⁽⁹⁾

On the other hand, objections were raised against the “unassimilable” Japanese because they were doing *too good* a job at integrating in Canadian society. The Japanese, Lemieux wrote in his notes, were more competitive, had “more energy,” and had “more independence than others.” He then listed the different sectors where Japanese were employing their “competitive” spirit: fisheries, lumber industries, boat building, mining industry, railways, sealing, domestic servants, market gardening, farming, land clearing, tailors, waiters, and finally the all-encompassing “engaged in business.”⁽¹⁰⁾ The Japanese faced more hostility from whites in B.C. than the Chinese or Asian Indians, even when they were employed in the same sectors, because the Japanese enterprising attitude represented a clear threat to established notions of the superiority of the white race. That threat is clearly demonstrated in the report:

“There is an uneasiness in British Columbia to-day that would not be felt if the Asiatic immigration were confined to Chinese and Hindoos, who are looked upon the whites as greatly inferior races...The Japanese do not confine themselves to limited and subordinate occupations as do the Chinese and Hindoos. The Japanese are competing with white merchants for white trade; they are competing with white artisans and clerks for work and employment in every line of activity. I visited the town of Steveston [near Vancouver], where formerly over 3,000 white fishermen earned their living; they have been entirely supplanted by the Japanese. Steveston is now to all intents and purposes a Japanese town.”⁽¹¹⁾

The Japanese work ethic and enthusiasm clearly represented the kind of labour Laurier needed to fulfill his promise of a strong and economically vibrant 20th century for Canada. However, their presence on Canadian soil manifested another unique, though ill-defined, problem. According to

Lemieux's notes, the large-scale presence of "Mongolians" in "an Anglo-Saxon country" was "fraught with danger." These "races [were] unfamiliar" with "democratic institutions," and thus threatened – though he never explained how – British and Anglo-Saxon civilization. Although he noted that the ratio of whites to Asians in B.C. was an alarming "1 in every 4," he concluded that the "reason for restriction [was] far more compelling." Orientals belong to a civilisation radically different than ours. Well nigh impossible gulf between the 2[.]" There was more language of fear: "the whites fear that in a very few years, under existing conditions, that ratio [of 1 in every 4] will be so decreased as to make British Columbia an Asiatic Colony."⁽¹²⁾

In a primarily white British Columbia, it was easy to blame "the yellow race" for the province's various problems. Labour leaders complained that they took jobs away from white workers and that they worked for lower wages – though the truth was that factory owners exploited Asians for lower wages than whites would accept. Politicians and religious leaders claimed they were "unassimilable" and lived in unsanitary conditions – though these leaders made no effort to include them in their community or help improve their living conditions. Thus the solution to such an increasingly multicultural country – the Lemieux mission – was to shut the door to those most visibly "not like the others."

The Japanese in Canada might have been easy to exploit and blame, but Japan in 1907 was not weak. Lemieux would discover how difficult it would be to achieve his government's goals.

Lemieux arrived in Yokohama on 14 November. The British Ambassador to Japan, Sir Claude MacDonald, lent the Lemieux team

valuable diplomatic help. MacDonald introduced Lemieux to Foreign Minister Count Hayashi Tadasu and the first official meeting was scheduled for 25 November.

At this meeting, Lemieux's insisted that the Japanese abide by the "Nosse promises" and limit emigration to Canada to 300 labourers and artisans a year. Lemieux attempted to flatter his hosts by emphasizing the history of goodwill and cordial relations between the two countries. On this matter of "goodwill," Lemieux pointed out that the Laurier-led federal government had disallowed 22 of B.C.'s anti-Asian statues in the last ten years, including nine that specifically restricted Japanese immigration. But Lemieux's statement did not reveal the whole truth. The real pressure to disallow B.C.'s legislation came from the Japanese government, via the British authorities in London, rather than the federal government's own sense of outrage over the discriminatory legislation.⁽¹³⁾ Furthermore, Lemieux was pleased to announce that his government had approved a compensation package worth \$9175 to the Japanese community and \$1600 for the Japanese Consulate's legal costs. Lemieux's intention was to demonstrate that the Canadian government could and did differentiate racially between the Japanese and the Chinese (if only for diplomacy's sake), even if British Columbians only saw "Orientals," "Asiatics," and "Mongolian hordes."

Hayashi and his Vice-Minister the Baron Chinda dismissed the Canadian Minister's case. First, according to Chinda, Consul-General Nosse was "not authorized to give such assurance" in promising restrictions on emigration. This had been Lemieux's strongest argument and Chinda's remark suddenly undermined the diplomatic and legal grounds of Lemieux's case. Second, Hayashi promised to study Lemieux's proposals

but he warned the Canadian that the Japanese people “were high spirited and sensitive” and they would not look favourably towards a treaty which limited their freedom to emigrate, and “that they could not tolerate being regarded as inferior to other races against whom no other restrictions were enforced.”⁽¹⁴⁾ In this respect, Hayashi taught his Canadian and British guests a history lesson. When the American Commodore Matthew Perry sailed in Edo Bay in 1853, he told the Japanese that “the only way” they would elevate themselves among the world’s nations would be by “welcoming all races to their shores.” Fifty years later, Japan’s ports were open to Americans and other Westerners while Asian “races” had the immigration “door shut in their faces” in Western countries.⁽¹⁵⁾ This example of American (and by extension Canadian) hypocrisy was not lost on Lemieux. He came to appreciate the tensions his government’s efforts to treat Japanese immigrants as third-class (after the British and other white Europeans) were having in Japan.

Count Hayashi returned a week later to announce that while the Japanese government could not enter into a new treaty, it “acknowledged our difficulties in [Canada]” and was thus prepared to limit emigration.⁽¹⁶⁾ In truth, bearing in mind its special relationship with Britain and the situation in British Columbia, the Japanese had very few available options. Even though the Japanese government stood on the legal high ground, it could not possibly ask for the *status quo* vis-à-vis Canada. To do so would invite more physical harm and discriminatory legislation against Japanese residing, or desiring to reside, in Canada. For the Japanese to go against the Canadian government’s express wishes might alienate Great Britain, their powerful ally. Yet to accept Canadian demands would be to acknowledge that, despite their newfound Great Power status and alliance with Great Britain, they were considered an “inferior race” and lumped

in the same category of unwanted people as the Chinese and the Indians. Hayashi accepted the Canadian demands because while the restrictions were insulting and their treaty rights violated, there were other places where Japanese labour could emigrate and make a valuable contribution, such as Korea, Manchuria, and South America.⁽¹⁷⁾

Rodolphe Lemieux, Claude MacDonald, Joseph Pope (the Canadian undersecretary of State for External Affairs), and Ishii Kikujiro (then Director of the Bureau of Commerce of the Foreign Ministry) drafted a proposal on December 4 that would become the basis for the Lemieux Agreement. The wording of the proposal conveyed a stronger sense of racial exclusion than even Lemieux had originally suggested. Whereas Lemieux had demanded a limit of 300 labourers and artisans per year, according to the proposed draft, all Japanese emigration would be forbidden. Only four exemptions were made: 1) current Japanese residents of Canada; 2) domestics for Japanese residents; 3) contract labourers requested by Japanese residing in Canada or by Canadian nationals, who then needed the Canadian government's approval; and 4) agricultural workers or miners for Japanese-owned farms and mines.⁽¹⁸⁾ Rather than change the wording of the 1894 treaty, the Japanese government would send a letter detailing these instructions to the British Ambassador and the local Consular authorities. These four exceptions had a dual purpose. Those few permitted to emigrate would be working on the margins of the Canadian economy. Furthermore, the restrictions indicated a desire to segregate Japanese workers and their community from the white community.

Lemieux returned to Ottawa in January 1908 and the Cabinet approved Lemieux's arrangement. This became known as the "Lemieux

Agreement.” From May 1908, Japanese immigration ground to a halt and less than 50 left for Canada over the next six months. The Lemieux Mission, in B.C.’s white community’s opinion, had clearly been a success.

Conclusion

With a population consisting of French, English, and Aboriginal peoples, Canada had been “multi-cultural” before 1900. However, Aboriginals lived on reserves and, except for some communities in Quebec, Ontario, and New Brunswick, there was little daily interaction between French and English. When the transcontinental railway opened Western Canada to large-scale settlement, immigrants from various countries and cultures now lived closely together in the same communities. In the majority of these communities, whites and those of British descent claimed the moral and political higher ground.

How did British Columbia, the first Canadian province to experience multiculturalism with people from Asia, deal with this situation? As the province was on the front lines of Asian immigration, political and labour leaders’ actions entailed the construction of a white Anglo-Saxon country, rather than the construction of an economically strong country which could develop its vast natural resources and compete with the United States. Despite Canada’s multi-ethnic community, it was easy to claim superiority for political gain in the era of Social Darwinism and “Yellow Peril.” This was particularly true in British Columbia, which was on the front lines of Asian immigration. The white Anglo-Saxon leaders of B.C. used the baseless rhetoric of fear (“hordes of Orientals” who drove down wages) to rally their fellow Canadians to the cause of Asian exclusion and discriminatory immigration legislation. While the Lemieux mission targeted only Japanese migrants, it was one part of a larger effort by

provincial and federal governments to bar Asian peoples from settling on Canada's shores.

The solution was not to help the Japanese or other Asian immigrants integrate in Canadian society. The solution was to prevent them from immigrating to Canada. Even though the Japanese held rights enshrined in a British treaty that permitted them "full liberty" to travel and reside in Canada, the Japanese government could not force the Canadian government to obey the treaty. The strong anti-Asian feeling in Canada and the desire to keep Great Britain as an ally forced the Japanese government to allow restrictions on emigration. The Lemieux Agreement was initially enforced to keep Canada, particularly British Columbia, "white" and to quell labour's fear of "unfair competition." Discriminatory immigration measures against the Chinese endured until the end of the Second World War, and until 1968 for Japanese immigrants, because there was no political will in Canada, nor elsewhere in the white Western world, to end the measures.

Notes

- (1) Masako Iino, "Japan's Reaction to the Vancouver Riot of 1907," *BC Studies* 60 (Winter 1983-1984): 36.
- (2) Iino, 35-36.
- (3) Honorius Lacombe, "La mission Lemieux au Japon (1907-1908)." MA Thesis, University of Ottawa, 1951, 7. Originally quoted from *British and Foreign State Papers*, 1893-1894, vol. LXXXVI, A.H. Oakes and Maycock, eds. (London: Willoughby, 1904), 40.
- (4) The Canadian government, however, had no diplomatic qualms about offending the Chinese, as the head tax attests.
- (5) Robert Joseph Gowen, "Canada and the Myth of the Japan Market, 1896-1911," *The Pacific Historical Review* 39, no. 1 (Feb. 1970): 72-73.
- (6) Letter from Nosse Tatsugoro to Wilfrid Laurier, no. 97258, 8 May 1905, Sir Wilfrid Laurier fonds (MG26-G), Library and Archives Canada [LAC].

- (7) A full account of the Vancouver Riot can be found in Patricia Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1989), chapter 8. Three days earlier, there had been an anti-Asian riot in nearby Bellingham, Washington, and there had been a number of anti-Asian riots across the Pacific states in 1907.
- (8) Sessional Papers, No. 74b, 165, quoted in Howard Sugimoto, *Japanese Immigration, the Vancouver Riots, and Canadian Diplomacy* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 159.
- (9) Lemieux notes, 146, vol. 3, Lemieux fonds, MG 27 II D10, LAC. Menial, dirty, and dangerous jobs are the "kitsui, kitanai, kiken" (the 3Ks) that the Japanese today say they will not do. The McInnes report and comments from British officials can be found at 326-331, 2 October -28 November 1907, F.O. 371/274, Public Record Office. I used *British Foreign Office Japan Correspondence, 1906-1929* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1988) to locate the McInnes report.
- (10) Lemieux notes, 150, vol. 3, Lemieux fonds, LAC.
- (11) W.E. McInnes to Frank Oliver, 328, 2 October 1907, F.O. 371/274, Public Record Office.
- (12) Lemieux notes, 151, vol. 3, Lemieux fonds, LAC; McInnes to Oliver, 328, 2 October 1907, F.O. 371/274, Public Record Office. Underline in original document.
- (13) Iino, "Japan's Reaction to the Vancouver Riot," 35-36.
- (14) Precis of interview with Count Hayashi at the Foreign Office, 255, 25 November 1907, vol. 4, Lemieux fonds, LAC.
- (15) *Ibid.*, 256.
- (16) Precis of the meeting held at the Foreign Office at Tokio, 370-372, 2 December 1907, vol. 4, Lemieux fonds, LAC.
- (17) Around the same time the Lemieux was in Japan, President Theodore Roosevelt's Administration and the Japanese government exchanged a series of notes which effectively ended Japanese emigration to the U.S. (but not, for the moment, to Hawaii). Japanese authorities did not issue passports to people wishing to work in the United States. This became known as the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement.
- (18) Precis of the meeting held at the British Embassy, 406, 4 December 1907, vol. 5, Lemieux fonds, LAC.