

LESSON 3 SOURCE 3.9 DISPOSSESSION BACKGROUNDER

A PROMISE BROKEN

On 7 December 1941, Canada declared war against Japan. The Imperial Japanese Military Air Service had bombed Pearl Harbour, an American naval base in Hawai'i. In retaliation, the United States declared war on Japan, and Canada, an ally of the United States, followed suit.

Canadian officials implemented domestic policies as they adjusted to the new international context. In the following days, the R.C.M.P. arrested 38 Japanese Canadians who they suspected held allegiance to Imperial Japan. A week later, the **Office of the Custodian of Enemy Property** opened a branch in Vancouver. This office oversaw the property of people who were interned for their political allegiances or nationality status during wartime. With few cases to oversee, the Office in Vancouver was small. Its Director, **Glenn McPherson**, was a young bureaucrat with little experience.

Canada passed further domestic policies after it declared war against Japan. The policies originated in the pretense of national security, but were strongly influenced by politicians who held strong animosity against Japanese Canadians. For instance, Cabinet ordered the seizure of any fishing vessel that Japanese Canadians owned. This law removed over 1,200 vessels from the industry. Within weeks, however, Cabinet passed another law to sell the fishing vessels to other fishermen.

In early January, Cabinet members debated next steps. The Commissioner of the R.C.M.P. reported that Japanese Canadians posed no threat to national security. Dismissing the R.C.M.P. report, British Columbian politicians, like **Ian A. McKenzie**, argued to enforce strict measures against Japanese Canadians. Back home, their supporters called for the complete removal of Japanese Canadians from the province. A Committee member later recalled how other members described Japanese Canadians as a menace: "They spoke of the Japanese Canadians in the way that the Nazis would have spoken about Jewish-Germans. When they spoke, I felt in that committee room the physical presence of evil."

Strongly influenced by the B.C. politicians, Cabinet passed new laws that expanded to all Japanese Canadians. One law sent men ages 18–45 to labour camps in remote parts of the province. Another declared a "protected zone," which spanned roughly 160 kilometres inland from B.C.'s western coast. Within this "protected zone," Cabinet required Japanese Canadians to turn in their radios, automobiles, firearms, and explosives to the R.C.M.P. Cabinet also declared a curfew in the "protected zone": no Japanese Canadian could be outside their home between sunset and sunrise.

The law with the greatest implications was passed on 4 March 1942: **O.I.C. 1665**. This law ordered the removal of "all persons of the Japanese race" from the "protected zone." The law addressed a racial category — "persons of the Japanese race" — rather than persons of a certain political affiliation or nationality. As such, it applied to nearly 22,000 Japanese Canadians, 75% of whom were Canadian citizens. Cabinet created a department, the **British Columbia Security Commission**, to oversee the uprooting of Japanese Canadians from their homes and resettlement in temporary camps outside of the "protected zone." The law limited Japanese Canadians to bringing roughly two suitcases of luggage to the camps.

The same law, O.I.C. 1665, deemed the Vancouver Office of the Custodian legally responsible for Japanese Canadians' property. Many Japanese Canadians questioned the implications of this law. Their responses pushed Cabinet to pass a further law, **O.I.C. 2483** that explained that the Vancouver Office of the Custodian would protect their property in their absence. In local newspapers, the Office Director, Glenn McPherson, explained that the legal seizure of their property was a "protective measure only."

Under Orders-in-Council 1665 and 2483, the property of nearly 22,000 people became the responsibility of the Vancouver Office of the Custodian. In Vancouver, Glenn McPherson hired hundreds of employees to register

LESSON 3 SOURCE 3.9 DISPOSSESSION BACKGROUNDER

and manage the homes, businesses, and belongings of Japanese Canadians. The task of protecting Japanese Canadians' property, however, soon overwhelmed his office. His officials mislabeled and lost Japanese Canadians' belongings. Locals looted and vandalized Japanese Canadians' homes and businesses. Further, interested buyers were eyeing Japanese Canadians' homes, farms, and businesses.

One government department hoped to benefit from Japanese Canadians' misfortune: the Soldier Settlement Board, a department within Veteran's Affairs. In summer 1942, real estate assessors determined the value of Japanese Canadians' farmlands for the Soldier Settlement Board. These officials argued that the tenants who leased Japanese Canadians' farms were letting them deteriorate. They argued that the lands should be sold in order to maintain the local agricultural industry.

Officials at the City of Vancouver saw another opportunity in Japanese Canadians' property. Vancouver was home to the largest Japanese-Canadian enclave in the province, the Powell Street neighborhood. The Vancouver Office of the Custodian found renters to fill Japanese Canadians' houses. The Office also ran their businesses. But the Vancouver Town Planning Commission saw the uprooting of Japanese Canadians as an opportunity to build a new, modern housing development. The Planning Commission led tours through the Powell Street neighborhood to demonstrate that the houses were "in a generally run-down condition," and therefore unfit for "human habitation." They urged McPherson's office to cease renting and managing the properties owned by Japanese Canadians and instead to authorize their forced sale.

In late 1942, the Vancouver Office of the Custodian was struggling to protect Japanese Canadians' belongings. Privately, McPherson held hostile beliefs about Japanese Canadians. This may have impacted his management of their properties. Rather than adjust the Vancouver Office's

approach to better protect Japanese Canadians' property, McPherson chose a simpler solution.

Instead, he would sell everything Japanese Canadians owned. From the outset of the uprooting, the Custodian sold anything classed as "perishable." Items such as grocery stock were sold without consultation with Japanese-Canadian owners on the assumption that this course of action served their interests and the funds were credited to accounts held with the Custodian. McPherson combined the arguments of the Soldier Settlement Board, the Vancouver Town Planning Commission, and his staffers who reported the "rapid deterioration" of the personal belongings of Japanese Canadians. These separate lines of discussion converged and McPherson drew them together into a single argument for the forced sale of all Japanese Canadian properties.

In December 1942, McPherson advised his superior, **Ephraim Coleman**, "it is obvious, both in the city and country, that the Japanese property is going to deteriorate rapidly." The government's policy, he counselled "should be one of liquidation." If they did not sell Japanese Canadians' property now, he argued, they would lose its monetary value. Coleman repeated such arguments to his boss, Secretary of State **Norman McLarty**. McPherson's claims circulated to other cabinet ministers. Federal politicians embraced the logic of perishability, affirming the powers of the Custodian to sell all Japanese Canadian owned property. The Cabinet members passed a law, **O.I.C. 469**, on January 19, 1943 that authorized the forced sale of everything Japanese Canadians owned.

Adapted from "Introduction," in Jordan Stanger-Ross (Ed.), *Landscapes of Injustice: A New Perspective on the Internment and Dispossession of Japanese Canadians*. Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020.

LESSON 3 SOURCE 3.9 DISPOSSESSION BACKGROUNDER

Key Figures in the Dispossession Process

Prime Minister of Canada William Lyon MacKenzie King

Federal Cabinet Ministers

- Ian MacKenzie – Minister Pensions and Health/Minister of Veteran Affairs
- Norman McLarty / Ephraim Coleman – Undersecretary of State
- Humphry Mitchell – Minister of Labour
- Thomas Crerar – Minister of Mines and Resources
- Louis St. Laurent – Minister of Justice/Attorney General

Key Bureaucrats

- Glenn McPherson – Director Office of The Custodian
- Frank Shears – Manager Office of the Custodian
- Gordon Murchison – Director Soldier Settlement Board
- Ivan Barnett – District Superintendent Soldier Settlement Board
- John Erskine Read – Legal Advisor to Undersecretary of State
- Henry F. Angus – Executive Assistant Undersecretary of State
- Hugh Keenleyside – Assistant Undersecretary of State

BC Security Commission

- Frederick J. Mead – R.C.M.P. Commissioner
- George Collins – Department of Labour
- Austin C. Taylor – B.C. Industrialist
- John Shirras – B.C. Provincial Police

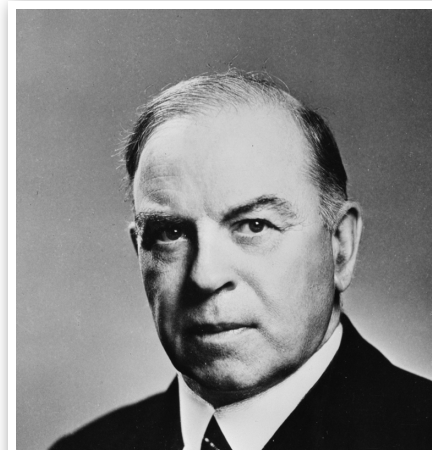
Important Legislation – Orders-in-Council

O.I.C. P.C. 1665 – March 4, 1942

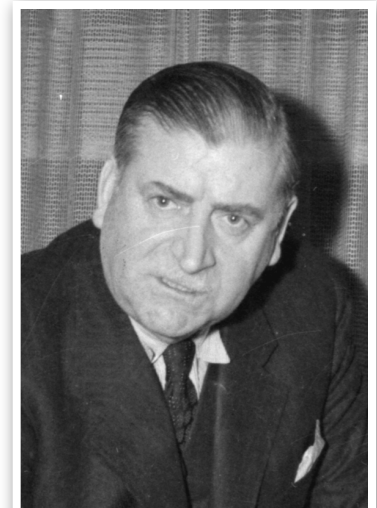
“WHEREAS in view of the serious situation prevailing in the Province of British Columbia arising out of the war with Japan it is deemed necessary to ... evacuate (sic) persons of the Japanese race from the protected areas”

Custody of Japanese Property

12. (1) “As a protective measure only, all property situated in any protected area of British Columbia, belonging to any person of the Japanese race resident in such area ... shall be vested in and subject to the control and management of the Custodian ...”



Prime Minister William Lyon MacKenzie King, 1947.
United States Library of Congress' Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USW33-019079-D



MP Ian MacKenzie.
Jack Lindsay. City of Vancouver Archives, 1184-198

LESSON 3 SOURCE 3.9 DISPOSSESSION BACKGROUNDER

O.I.C. P.C. 2483 – March 27, 1942

“WHEREAS by Order-in-Council P.C. 1665 dated March 4th, 1942, the British Columbia Security Commission was established for the purpose of planning, supervising and directing the evacuation from the protected areas of all persons of the Japanese race and for such purposes was empowered to...

Regulation 12 (1) is hereby rescinded and the following substituted therefore:

12(1) Subject as hereinafter in this Regulation provided, as a protective measure only, all property situated in any protected area of British Columbia belonging to any person of the Japanese race... shall be vested in and subject to the control and management of the Custodian...

(2) The Custodian may...order that all or any property whatsoever... for the purpose of protecting the interests of the owner or any other person, be vested in the Custodian, and the Custodian have full power to administer such property for the benefit of all such interested persons, and shall release such property upon being satisfied that the interests of the aforesaid will not be prejudiced thereby.”

O.I.C. P.C. 5523 – June 29, 1942

“WHEREAS the Minister of Mines and Resources and the Minister of Pensions and national Health report...persons of the Japanese race were or are engaged in agriculture and have been or shall be compelled to abandon farming operations on lands owned by them or by companies they control;

That is in the public interest to ascertain the actual number of such Japanese farms, to carry out an appraisalment of their fair present day value, and to consolidate the control and disposition of these lands by sale, lease or otherwise;

O.I.C. P.C. 469 – January 19, 1943

“THEREFORE, His excellency the Governor General in Council...doth hereby order as follows:

Without reciprocating the generality of powers hereinbefore conferred, all unfinished business of the said Committee is hereby transferred to the Custodian....Wherever...the Custodian has been vested with the power and responsibility of controlling and managing any property of persons of the Japanese race evacuated from the protected areas...such power and responsibility shall be deemed to have included from the date of vesting of such property in the Custodian, the power to liquidate, sell or otherwise dispose of such property...”



Glenn McPherson and Ephraim Coleman. University of British Columbia Rare Books and Special Collections, rbsc-arc-1368-4-3-Glenn McPherson and Ephraim Coleman