

During the 1950's the government of Canada moved seventeen Inuit Eskimo families in northern Quebec to a remote region in the high arctic as part of a policy of encouraging settlement in the area. They were abandoned in dreadful conditions, and, although promised the option of returning home if they desired, were not allowed to do so when they indicated a wish to return to their former home. It is unclear how many Canadians knew about any of this at the time, but it was not widely publicized. In the 1990's representatives of the Inuit people called upon the Canadian government to apologize for its actions in the 1950's, but the government rejected these calls. One administrator in Canada's Indian Affairs Ministry was reported to have said the following: "An apology implies we're apologizing for something we did. Now there's nobody in the government who had anything to do with the relocation at the original time; so I think it might be more appropriate to say there'd be an expression of regret on behalf of the Canadian people." Against this viewpoint, a Canadian Human Rights Commission Report recommended that the government apologize for the hardship that the removal policy caused the Inuit.

Did the Canadian government owe the Inuit an apology, as distinct from an "expression of regret"? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Under the circumstances of this situation an apology is called for from the Canadian Government to the Inuit People. In most circumstances involving apologies individual human beings are involved both as the party who apologizes and party to whom the apology is addressed. This is not absolutely necessary, however. Philosopher Thomas Hobbes defined an apology as an expression by one party, involving appropriate words, addressed to another party, through which the party expressing the words acknowledges responsibility for having wronged the other party, and asks the other party's pardon for having done so. Under this definition, it would seem that either party to an apology can be an individual person, an institution, such as the Government of Canada, or an organized group, such as the Inuit People. For this reason, the fact that no individuals in the current Canadian government are the persons whose callousness and/or incompetence resulted decades ago in grievous suffering for many Inuit Eskimos does not mean that an apology from the Government to the Inuit People would be inappropriate. To the contrary, such an apology would seem morally required.

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