

On January 14, 1982 Clifford Robert Olson pleaded guilty in a Vancouver British Columbia courtroom to the rape and slaughter of eleven boys and girls. Olson's plea was entered in exchange for a promise by Canadian authorities that they would establish a \$90,000 trust fund for Olson's wife and infant son. Bruce Northrup, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police inspector who headed the investigation of Olson's crime, described the agreement as "probably the most difficult decision I have ever made." Northrup also said he was convinced that without evidence supplied by Olson, he (Olson) would "with luck" have been convicted only of second degree murder of one of his victims. That would have meant as little as eight years in prison. The police considered an attempt to seize the funds after the information was handed over. "But if the worst came to the worst and the money had to be tied up in a trust fund," said Northrup, "we would have lost the money, but it would have been worthwhile. The parents of the victims were outraged, and filed suit for the return of the funds.

Were the Canadian authorities morally justified in entering into the agreement with Olson? Why, or why not?

MDDERATOR'S ANSWER: The decision of the Canadian authorities in this case was morally justifiable. The thought of a mass serial murderer benefitting financially through his confession is emotionally repugnant. Nonetheless, the general practice of allowing some individuals to benefit from criminal behavior in order to secure the convictions of other individuals is well established, and, apparently, necessary in many cases. That the person who benefits and the person convicted in this case are the same is not critical. The key issue instead is whether the evils prevented or avoided as a result of striking the deal with Olson sufficiently outweighed the evils caused by the deal so as to justify agreeing to it. The judgment in this case is difficult, but it would seem the prosecutor's decision was not unreasonable in light of all the circumstances.

Case from the 1995 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1995.