

Transcript of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Official Apology
for the 1914 *Komagata Maru* Incident⁴

Location: Surrey, British Columbia, Bear Creek Park

Event: *Gadri Babian da Mela*

Opening: A bhangra performance by the Surrey India Arts Club.

Nina Grewal (MP): I would like to thank the Surrey India Arts Club for such a wonderful performance. Let's give them a big hand. They also went to Ottawa and had a wonderful performance during the *Vaisakhi* celebrations that I hosted in Ottawa ... [and] during the *Vaisakhi* celebrations that I hosted in April. I know that the Prime Minister is a big fan of the bhangra.

Jim Abbot (Parliamentary Secretary): It's now time to start our formal program for this afternoon. In 2006, the Prime Minister gave me the privilege of consulting with Indo-Canadians in Vancouver and Toronto on the issue of the *Komagata Maru*. As you are all well aware, this is a dark moment in our great nation's history. I have listened to how the events of 1914 have affected the Indo-Canadian community and how we as a government could best respond to this issue. At around the same time I put together my findings, a young man here with us today was appointed to cabinet. Jason Kenney is no stranger to this topic; he has been a vocal member of our government and cabinet when this issue has come up for debate. Without him, today's announcement would not be possible.

Nina Grewal (MP): Ladies and Gentlemen, Our first speaker has been the voice of newcomers and cultural communities since our party took government. He is both a friend of our [sic] and an advocate for the Indo-Canadian community. It is both an honour and a privilege to introduce my friend, Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity, the Honourable Jason Kenney.

Jason Kenney (Minister of Multiculturalism): Thank you Nina. Thank you Jim. *Sat Sri Akaal, Nameste, As-Salāmu Alaykum, Bonne après-midi*. Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Are you having a great time today? Are you enjoying the show? I would like to acknowledge all of the special guests joining us today and all of you ladies and gentlemen and boys and girls for this beautiful celebration of the rich and ancient culture of Punjab. The Mohan Singh Foundation threw this *mela* and activities throughout the year both here in Canada, India, and elsewhere, brings to life the best of Punjabi culture in the memory of that great poet, Professor Mohan Singh who also brought people together regardless of divisions or differences in faith and other backgrounds. He is somebody who believed in pluralism and that is the secret to our success in Canada. The Punjabi community in this country, indeed in this part of Canada, is over a

hundred years old. Canadians of Punjabi origin are not new to Canada; they have made a critical part of our cultural mosaic for over a century. So I thank all of you for bringing this rich culture to Canada as part of our diversity which is one of our unique strengths. It's a pleasure for me today to be here to introduce our nation's leader, the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Stephen Harper. You know that he has now been Prime Minister for two and a half years, and in that time he has worked hard to deliver results for all Canadians, including new Canadians by doing such things as cutting in half our right of landing fee, increasing funding for immigrant settlement organizations, providing and creating a national agency for foreign credential recognition. But he has also recognized important historic events. It was on this stage two years ago that he was the first Prime Minister in Canadian history to acknowledge the historic injustice and tragic nature of the events that occurred in Vancouver harbor and Burrard Inlet in the spring and summer of 1914. You all know the tragic story of the *Komagata Maru* when some 370 immigrants from, principally from Punjab of Sikh, Muslim and Hindu faiths came to this country as British subjects and after a sad period of waiting in the port of Vancouver, were turned back because of the continuous journey policy. The Prime Minister acknowledged this event on this stage two years ago. He undertook to consult with all Canadians, particularly those of South Asian origin about how best to address the issue. He charged Parliamentary Secretary Abbot to do that and I am pleased that we have since announced funding through the Community Historic and National Historic Recognition programmes to acknowledge, commemorate, and educate future generations about that sad event. And so, I am proud to be a member of Prime Minister Harper's government; I am proud of the leadership, the strong leadership he is providing for our country here at home and on the world stage. And so ladies and gentlemen, will you please join with me in welcoming here to the podium Canada's leader, the Right Honourable, the Prime Minister, Stephen Harper.

Stephen Harper (Prime Minister): Good Afternoon, *Bonne après-midi, Sat Sri Akaal, Nameste, As-Salāmu Alaykum*. Thank you Jason for that introduction. Greetings to my colleagues, Nina Grewal, Jim Abbot, and Russ Heaper, and fellow Canadians. I'd like to begin today by thanking the president of the Mohan Singh Memorial Foundation, Sahib Thind, for inviting me once again to this spectacular showcase of Punjabi culture. The vibrant dance and musical traditions, exquisite art and timeless literature being celebrated here today are the fruits of a millennial old civilization whose influence spans the globe. Canada now shares this rich cultural legacy; it has become an integral part of our own cultural diversity. [French Translation] Today over one million Canadians are of South Asian descent. These hard working men and women passionately devoted to their families and communities are helping make our country even stronger for the generations yet to come, our country that affords

opportunity to all, regardless of their background, our country that offers sanctuary to victims of violence and persecution, our country of freedom and democracy, of prosperity and peace, second to none in the world. As Canadians we have before us, and before our children and grandchildren, a future of literally unlimited possibility. A lot of that promise stems from the confidence, the ideas, and the energies brought here by successive waves of newcomers drawn to our shores by the promise of a new and better life. Canada is renowned the world over for its welcoming embrace of immigrants. But like all countries, our record isn't perfect. We haven't always lived up to our own ideals. One such failure, as has been mentioned, was the detention and turning away of the *Komagata Maru* in 1914, an event that caused much hardship for its passengers, 376 subjects of the British crown from Punjab, and which for many of them ended in terrible tragedy. Two years ago, I stood before you and made a commitment and since then, we have acted on that. [French Translation]. This May the Government of Canada secured passage of the unanimous motion in the House of Commons recognizing the *Komagata Maru* tragedy and apologizing to those who were directly affected. Today, on behalf of the Government of Canada. [Harper pauses to drink water]. Today, on behalf of the Government of Canada, I am officially conveying as Prime Minister that apology. Now friends, many Canadians have worked long and hard to secure recognition for this historic event. I'd like to thank from this community, the Professor Mohan Singh Foundation, the Khalsa Diwan Society, the *Komagata Maru* Descendants Association, and Community Leader, Tarlok Sablok, for their persistent and passionate dedication to this issue over the years. I also wish to acknowledge, I also wish to acknowledge my own colleagues, Nina and Gurmant Grewal, Parliamentary Secretary Jim Abbot, and Minister Jason Kenney for the work they have done to help all Canadians come to terms with this sad chapter in our history. We cannot change the events of the past; we cannot undo the misdeeds committed against those long deceased. But we can bring Canadians together in the present to unite our country, and to set us on a course to accomplish greater things in the future. In closing, I'd like to once again thank the organizers of this event for inviting me to once again be part of this tremendous festival. One of the most rewarding things about being Prime Minister is being able to travel across our great country and to meet the hardworking men and women of all faiths and cultures who are making Canada such a success. We should all be proud of our country and of each other and work together to build an even stronger Canada for all of us. Please enjoy the rest of the festivities. Thank you. *Merci Beaucoup*. God bless our land.