

MPs exchange words over interning Italian-Canadians

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OTTAWA Sharply worded accusations of Conservative racial discrimination and Liberal elitism were exchanged Thursday by MPs examining a contentious proposal to have the federal government formally apologize and grant redress to the Italian-Canadian community for the internment of hundreds of its members during the Second World War.

The fractious meeting of the House of Commons heritage committee followed a similarly stormy hearing last week during which Conservative and Bloc MPs traded barbs over whether Quebecers summarily arrested during the 1970 FLQ crisis were comparable to Italian-Canadian citizens sent to

prison camps in the 1940s.

During Thursday's meeting, Citizenship and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney rejected a Quebec Liberal MP's private member bill urging a formal apology, financial redress and a special postage stamp commemorating the internment of Italian-Canadian citizens during the 1939-45 war.

Kenney argued that former Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney had already issued a public apology in 1990 and that the current Conservative government recently created a \$5-million education fund to commemorate the internment.

But Liberal MP Maria Minna — a prominent member of Toronto's Italian-Canadian community — accused Kenney of a racial double-standard when it comes to offering for-

mal apologies to Canadian ethnocultural groups with historical grievances.

She noted that in June 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper stood in the House of Commons to apologize to Chinese-Canadians for a discriminatory head tax and exclusionary immigration policy from the early 20th century.

By contrast, she said, Mulroney's 1990 apology to Italian-Canadians was given during a luncheon speech in Toronto.

"The day you did the apology with the Chinese-Canadians I was glad," said Minna. "But I also cried, because my community — I personally, even now, feel offended and incensed — that you can sit there and tell me that for the Italian-Canadian community it's sufficient for someone to say 'I'm sorry' in a banquet hall, that it does not

deserve to say 'I'm sorry' in the Parliament of Canada."

The program has created friction among Canadians of Italian descent because it does not offer a parliamentary apology for the internment and falls short of a proposed \$12.5-million compensation package that was being negotiated with the previous Liberal government before the Conservative election victory in 2006.

More than 700 Italian-Canadian citizens are believed to have been sent to the Petawawa prison camp near Ottawa during the Second World War. They were made to work on farms, build roads and perform other labour under a national policy for "enemy aliens" that also targeted Canadians of Japanese, Ukrainian and German descent during the two world wars.