

**Interviewee: The
Honourable John Allen Fraser
Interviewer: Constance Sugiyama
Date: September 14, 2014
Location: The UBC Museum of
Anthropology, British Columbia
Accession Number: 2014-266**



SEDAI 
PROJECT

THE JAPANESE CANADIAN LEGACY PROJECT

[Start]

Constance Sugiyama: It's September 23 2014 and I'm in Vancouver with the Honourable John A. Fraser who is a former member of parliament, a member of the cabinet, former speaker of the house. This is a recording of John's story for the Sedai Project in Toronto. I'm going to start by asking you about your early years. If you would just share with me about your family background, where and when you were born, where did you live, and what were some of the formative experiences and influences in your life.

John Fraser: Well, I was born in Yokohama Japan on December 15, 1931. And people always ask me how did that happen. Well there is a bit of a story here because my father was a veteran of the First World War. He was first of all stretcher bearer in the fourth field ambulance and then he was a pilot in the royal flying core and he grew up in the Yukon but enlisted when he was 17 in 1914. And uh he went overseas and when he came back from being overseas the girl he thought he was interested in had married a policeman in Canada so he didn't have any particular interest. And he got working for, in Vancouver, for a man named H. R. McMillan who headed, eventually, the great McMillin Bloedel forestry firm. And he was sent to Japan to sell BC lumber. Now my mother had a fiancée in the First World War who was very badly wounded, decorated for bravery and he was brought back to Canada in 1918., invalided back to Canada and he died in the flu epidemic which went all through North America and of course Europe, but United States and Canada. And for whatever reason my mother didn't get involved with anybody and in 1929 I guess she and a cousin, a lady cousin, went on one of these cooks tours around the world and when she got, when mother got to Japan there was a friend of hers there who was working in the office which later became the Canadian embassy in Japan. And through this friend she was introduced to my father and this was a lot of years after early romances and a lot of things. But they married. And so, I was born in Japan. That's how I was born in Japan. Now I used to get asked continually how come you got born in Japan. And I was a mischievous smart aleck at times and I would say to be near me mum. I was walking to school one day in high school with two or three other players of the rugby team I played with, fit big guys, and there was a new guy in school and he asked me how come you got born in Japan? And they grabbed me, my buddies, if you say once more to be near me mum we're gonna hang you upside down in the shower. So, I sopped explaining that I was born in Japan to be near me mum but of course that was true. Now in those days if you were a foreign family on business in Japan you needed help because most foreigners didn't speak Japanese and in order to help look after me, my mother and father had an a-ma. At least that's what I remember she was called an a-ma I can't remember her name. But she of course was Japanese. Now my first memory in life is sleeping on the floor on a mat, next to my a-ma. My a-ma slept beside me. She was

with me everywhere. That didn't mean I didn't have a loving mother but that's just the first memory I have in life, is my Japanese a-ma who I loved dearly and when we eventually came to Canada.

[5 minutes]

JF: A few years later I suddenly realized when we were getting on the Empress of Japan to get to Vancouver that a-ma wasn't coming. Well I was just broken hearted I couldn't

CS: How old were you at that time?

JF: I would have been three I guess. I was old enough to know that I wasn't going to see her again.

CS: Can I go back for a moment? When you told people in Vancouver, your rugby team, that you were born in Japan to be close to your mother, did they assume your mother was Japanese?

JF: No, I don't think so um they were curious of course, well how come you ended up born in Japan. Um. I think they all knew my parents were Canadian and were not Japanese.

CS: Let's fast forward then when you got back to Vancouver and you would have been three, tell me about your schooling, your early years, high school.

JF: Before, before I went to school I would go shopping with my mother, this is in south Granville. And there was a five and ten or whatever they called the stores in those days and we'd go in there and they always had candies and also had trays, glass trays, with soldiers on the trays. And these soldiers were made in Britain and they represented different regiments and things. Well, I was fascinated by this and I remember vividly on several occasions being taken in there and I'm staring at these things and the man who was serving, from the, from the store said if you'll speak some Japanese for me I'll give you one. So, I knew enough baby Japanese to say a few words so I would get given a soldier. So, every time we went into that store or went by that store I would tug on my mother's arm and say I want to go in and see if I can get a soldier.

CS: Was the store owner Japanese?

JF: No, no they weren't Japanese. My mother very much wanted me to go to a Japanese Language School in the Vancouver area because she wanted me to, she didn't want me to lose what I had and she thought it was very valuable for me to have another language. But that never happened. So, I lost it all. Now I wasn't very old when I came to Canada.

CS: When you got back to Vancouver where did you live and then where did you go to school?

JF: Well we lived for a while on 14th Avenue just off Granville street. And the first school I went to was just a couple of blocks away that was grade one, Cecil Rhodes School. That was very interesting because I was a little bit younger than most of the kids there because my birthday was in December. Now you can say well that doesn't make that much difference, not when you're 20 or 30 but it does when you're five or six. And uh at one stage [laughs] John I don't understand why you don't know the answers to the questions we're asking because all of the other children do. And I said they've been here a lot longer than I have so my first year was a confusing year. I was not unhappy but I didn't really know what it was all about. And then we moved to Powell River where my father was in the lumber business. And that's where I went to school in grade 2 and for half of grade 3. and then I came back to Vancouver and in at the end of December or Christmas time when I was in grade three

and went to Prince of Wales Elementary School. That's, I was there for a year and a half. And then we moved to Quilchena Crescent, which was not very far away in Kerrisdale. So by the time I ended grade six at Quilchena I then went, the next year, I went to point grey junior high school which was grade seven, eight, and nine. And grade nine instead of staying at point grey I went to Prince of Wales High School which also had grade nine ten 11 and 12. Um and you gotta remember those were the war years. And when we lived on Quilchena Crescent.

[10 minutes]

JF: I came home from Sunday school at St. Mary's church, Kerrisdale, and the radio was on and my mother and father were listening. And I remember this distinctly. That aircraft have bombed the United States fleet at Pearl Harbour. And in the broadcast, they didn't say where the aircraft had come from. And I said to my father, but who were they? And he said they were Japanese and we've been warned about this for years and nobody paid any attention to it. Well from then on of course you have to sort of try to remember what Vancouver was like. After Pearl Harbour, there was a great feeling of defencelessness in, on the west coast here. The American fleet had a good part of it destroyed, not all of it thank goodness because there were able to win a battle at midway a year later. The fear was very very real. We had blackouts all the time. My father was a air raid warden. And the first aid centred on our street uh was owned by lady named Mrs. Watts. And it was sandbagged up to the second floor and this uh that is where the wounded and the injured were going to be taken if we were bombed. So, it was very real. And the next day after December 7th, which was a Sunday, and that was Pearl Harbour day. I of course went to off to Quilchena School like everybody else. And at the end of the day I walked down the steps at the south end of the school, like I always did, to the basement, because I took a shortcut across the basement and went out the basement doors onto the back playing ground and went home. When I got down to the basement there were at least six or seven kids all older than me and bigger waiting for me. And the first thing I heard is there's the Jap. Because they knew I was born in Japan. Well they beat the dickens out of me. And I fought back don't misunderstand me but I couldn't beat them all. And I got outside but they caught me there it was raining and I got home covered in mud and I was mad as mad as you can believe. I was not cowed, I was just furious. And I told this, I told this story to my, my mother said what happened to you how did this happen. And I told her. And she said well tell them Japanese kids don't have blue eyes and they won't do it again. And I remember stamping my feet saying, "Oh mother, you don't understand what's going on." [laughing].

CS: And did this persist?

JF: It persisted a couple of times before Christmas. But there's another part of this story. I got one of them one day by himself and he went home crying his eyes out because I did everything I could to beat the dickens out of him. But it just goes to show, those kids didn't make it up they got it at home. And again, there was a lot of racism in in Vancouver in those days. It wasn't just the Japanese, it was the Chinese and Jewish people, now that's another story because I grew up with Jewish kids and I've been involved with Jewish causes and things all my life since, because of what I saw when I was a child. But it's also what I saw as a child with respect to Canadians of Japanese origin or descent. A lot of people forget that it

was very real and I've often been asked by sophisticated people who have PhDs and university degrees and everything about why this happened. Well set aside for the moment racism, because there was racism, but it wasn't everywhere and it wasn't everybody. But it was fear. And when you could hear the sirens go on and the blackouts and you knew that the Americans couldn't defend us because they didn't have anything left. All our aircraft which had been out at the airport had been sent to Britain months before.

[15 minutes]

JF: You knew what fear was. And fear does things to people, that it wouldn't, that it, and it makes them act in a way they might not act otherwise.

CS: How did your father feel about this? And what did he say to you knowing that you were beaten up by these kids at school?

JF: My father's first reaction is did ya, what did, did you get any of them? That was his first reaction and uh my father had lived seven years in Japan and he did something very few North Americans or probably Europeans who went to Japan he worked every day on trying to learn Japanese. Now was he really fluent in Japanese? I doubt it. But the Japanese were very impressed that this guy from Canada who would be making such an effort to speak with them in their own language. And I think my father was, I think he was fairly good at it. He never would have said he was perfect in it. But he made the effort. The other thing was that my father had a tremendous regard for the Japanese people. He liked them. And he had friends and I can remember after the war, this is just an example, after the war was over, he showed me a letter that we received in Vancouver, 1946 I guess from a Japanese couple that had been friends with my father and mother years before. And it was a very sad story because it was about their only son who had been killed in action in the war. And I read this thing. And, now I wasn't very old, but I wasn't a kid anymore, I wasn't just a child. It was just a letter of anguish, but no hate in it. And regards for my mother and father and that they missed them and all that sort of thing. So now my father had very strong views. First of all he was no pacifist. He had fought in the First World War. He joined at 17, sent to France at 18 as a stretcher-bearer. And he was a stretcher-bearer for two years in the trenches before Vimy Ridge. He was given a notice to report to a flying squadron to learn how to fly in Great Britain so he missed Vimy. All my uncles were there at Vimy. And then he came back, his squadron was a reconnaissance squadron and he flew with with the squadron in France against the enemy from I guess the autumn of uh the spring of 1917 right through to the end of the war. And he saw a real war. And on armistice night there were only three people left in the squadron that had been there when he joined it. They hadn't all been killed, some of them had broken down and couldn't fly anymore but a number of them had been killed. So he knew all about war. He also paid an awful lot of attention to the air forces around the world and uh because he'd been a pilot and paid attention, and he also paid attention to naval building. And my father was convinced after the first few years in Japan that the Japanese War Party was going to eventually take Japan into a war against the United States and other countries in Asia. My father also was completely convinced that after 1933 when Hitler the head of the Nazis took over Germany that we were clearly gonna have a war with Germany. But what my father used to say to me when I got older and could listen to him, he said not very many people could sort of accept that but they didn't they didn't realize that Japan was really going to be a terrible

problem. And it's easy to blame the Americans because they stopped shipping steel and oil and things like that but that doesn't get around the fact that the Japanese war party was bent on expansion and that was going to eventually bump into everyone else and that's what happened. So when my when during after Pearl Harbour, uh when they, the government decided that all people of Japanese origin or descent had to be interned because they were a threat to the safety of the west coast.

[20 minutes]

JF: As I say, remember what I said about fear, it's fear. Well my father spoke out about it. And he said this is crazy. Here's 20 thousand or more people they're no more of a threat to us than the man on the moon. And they're Canadians now. Apart from whatever the citizenship said but for all practical purposes and part of this was clearly because he spent all those years in Japan and he liked the Japanese people, he admired them. Well in the neighbourhood of course there was all kinds of rumblings that went on and I would get it through the kids of the parents. You know the terrible Japanese. And the puzzlement that my father spoke out against, the internment. But they wouldn't criticize me or my father because of course he had a war record that they couldn't forget, it was real.

CS: That must have been a very unpopular position for him to take at the time given the fear.

JF: It was unpopular with a lot of people. But there's also this to remember, my father used to insist I remember this when I grew up. It wasn't everybody. Not everybody was in favour of the internment.

CS: How many people spoke up? As your father did.

JF: Well not enough obviously. And many years later when I was a member of parliament in the Mulroney government, an event was planned at Stanley Park. To celebrate I guess redress or the end of war or something like that with respect to our Japanese Canadians so it must have been after redress was announced. Anyway, Mulroney got in touch with me and I want you to go out there and speak on behalf of the party and on behalf of yourself. So there was this great gathering in Stanley Park and there were a lot of [legioner?] people there with their medals up most of whom many years before had probably been very anti-Japanese but changed their minds. I told an interesting story because I was asked to speak. I used to go with my father every armistice day to the Cenotaph in Vancouver. Now my father of course would have his medals up and I was an inquisitive kid and I'd go with him. And it seemed to always rain I do remember that. And I used to say father was, "Does it always rain on November 11th?" and he said, "God is crying for the people that died." But anyway we were driving home and instead of driving home to Kerrisdale he drove down to Stanley Park. And I said, "Where are we going?" and he said, "I want to show you something." Now this is the story I told at this at this memorial meeting at Stanley Park. And he parked the car and we went out past the animal cages and got up to a higher piece of ground and started down the other side and he said now look at that. And I looked at a monument that was maybe 30 or 40 feet high and he said, "Do you know what that is?" And I said, "No but it's Japanese isn't it?" He said, "Yes and I wanna show you something." So we walked over to it and if I remember correctly there were five or six names, all Japanese names, on the monument. So, I'm saying, "Were did this come from?" He said, "That was put up by people like myself after the end of the first world war to remember the Japanese

Canadian or the Canadians of Japanese origin who enlisted with me and fought with us in Europe as Canadian soldiers." And I said, "Well what happened?" And he said, "Well there was a light on top of it and he said that Vancouver City Council after Pearl Harbour extinguished the light." And I'm only a kid and I said, "But these people had nothing to do with Pearl Harbour." And he said, "No, but he said that's what they decided to do." And one of the councillors who my father knew fairly well uh was very strong on this and his name was Helford Wilson I remember.

[25 minutes]

JF: And now he wasn't a bad man, but he felt so strongly about everything that he was one of those who talked other people into turning the light out. The light was finally been turned on but I told this story to this crowd and uh I don't wanna say I'm a great speaker or anything but you could've heard a pin drop even though that was outdoors in Stanley Park. There was a hush.

CS: The veterans they must have felt

JF: Many, many of them were veterans and there was just a hush listening to this. But it's fascinating that my father who was a veteran and he was no pacifist and he had no illusions about what the Japanese War Party was up to. And he wanted to make sure I saw what we had done and he said this is so wrong. And he said, "You remember this. All your life don't ever forget it." And of course I haven't.

CS: Let's fast forward. You went to Law School in British Columbia?

JF: I went to UBC. And we started in the old army huts and ended in a more modern building [laughing]. I graduated in 54.

CS: And in the time of the Second World War, you were too young to fight. You're younger than my dad. But what happened then? Do you remember? In Kerrisdale, there would not have been probably any Japanese Canadians. Did you have friends do you remember what you were thinking when the Japanese Canadians were sent to the interior?

JF: Well of course [speaking unclear] you gotta realize I got a lot of my notions about all this from both my mother and father who both thought what Canada was doing was absolutely wrong. And there's another thing a lot of Canadians forget. Yes the American did intern Americans of Japanese origin but they also formed a whole division of Japanese American warriors.

CS: 442nd.

JF: That may have been the number I've forgotten but what is also interesting is it gave these Americans of Japanese descent a chance to fight for their country. Now we wouldn't do that and we were absolutely wrong in what we did. And there is I can tell some stories about that too. But the interesting thing about that American division is that there may have been other divisions in the American armed forces who were just as good. But my reading of the situation is that no other division had a greater number of medals awarded for bravery and leadership than that.

CS: That's correct.

JF: American Japanese division. Now sensibly they didn't send them to fight against the Japanese, but they sent them to Europe. But we didn't do that. Uh we did take some Japanese in at the very end, but we wouldn't even do it for the Chinese. And the Chinese were our allies. I went to school, law school, with Doug Chung who was older than me of

course, and he, like so many, tried to get into the Canadian armed forces, and again there was a racial problem there but finally they did get in. and he was with a special unit of Canadians mostly of Chinese origin. Or Chinese Canadians. And he was dropped into the lines, behind the lines in Burma against the enemy. So, we so we behaved not only fearfully, and I can understand that, but we behaved very badly in terms of common sense and any sense of the future. Remember after the war we sent a lot of Canadians of Japanese origin or Japanese descent back to Japan. Because they felt they may as well go there because there was no use trying to pick up the pieces in Canada. And when we interned the Japanese we didn't just intern them, or just put them under surveillance or something, we took away their boots, we took away their farms, we took away their means of of existence. We wiped out years and years and years of work that they had built up. I get, look it's a lot of years ago but I still feel very passionately that what we did was wrong.

[30 minutes]

JF: And so years later when the whole question of redress came up I had to deal with members of parliament who were against it because well the Japanese it was a sneak attack et cetera, et cetera, et cetera why should we give them any redress. And I would have arguments with them. But there was an element, even among members of parliament, that uh, why should we bother doing this? Now there were others who felt differently. And one of the men that I that I remember very vividly was an Ontario member and he was with the Canadian forces in Burma. And the Japanese must have attacked because there was a young lad who was killed in action and, a Japanese lad, and Bill Kempling went through the lad's pockets and took out a little Japanese flag that this lad had stuck over his heart. Patriotic, patriotic thing to do. Now he was one of those who uh I talked to and who got up in caucus because I was speaker at the time and I couldn't get up in caucus and persuaded quite a few of our members that uh look that was yesterday and we got to put it behind us. Anyway he was sent on a delegation to Japan, I think first of all to Hong Kong where a lot of Canadians were killed. And then they went to Japan and I think they visited a memorial to the Canadian prisoners who died during the war in captivity. He took the flag with him. He got hold of the Japanese officials, now this is amazing, I don't know how this happened, he may have had a dog tag or something from this dead Japanese but I don't know about that.

Anyway the Japanese identified this lad and concurred with Bill Kempling's request to visit his parents. Which he did and he took the flag out and he gave it to the mother and father.

CS: That's an incredible story. So he was an MP and a member of the Tory caucus was he?

JF: He was an MP and a member of the Tory caucus and he also fought a war and against the Japanese. But there was a decency in the man. And you know not everyone who served in the Japanese armed forces uh was some vile person. That lad was patriotic like so many of them were and uh can you imagine what that must have meant to that boy's mother and father? But think of the effect it had when Bill Kempling got up in a caucus meeting and told that story.

CS: Let's just go back a little bit to the early days and what took you to politics before we got to the point where you were speaker of the house. What, you have a tremendous commitment to public service and what was behind that?

JF: well partly you gotta remember what British Columbia was like in those years when I was growing up as a teenager. Everybody was a liberal. Well except for the CCF, the NDP.

And uh I think part of it was I was mischievous and I didn't want to be a liberal. And I also knew quite a lot of Canadian history and the conservative side of Canadian history is I think is a story people outta know because it had a lot to do with building the country and I'll just name one of them John A MacDonal had because he was able to reach across to French Canada was able with outstanding French speaking Canadians to put the country together in the first place. So I had this historical interest in it all. I also thought that Canada had a very real role to play internationally and that uh

[35 minutes]

JF: I was absolutely convinced that Stalin wasn't much better than Hitler. And that we needed a strong-armed force. Uh I was fed up with the latent anti-Americanism in Canada which brass me off because uh, and there was a lot of it. Uh and it was by woolly headed little minded people who had no idea just how important the United States was and still is to the free world. And uh I also had very strong environmental views. And I didn't think enough was being done in that. So for a number of reasons I got sort of interested in observing a political scene let me put it that way. Now my father, my father was a sort of a liberal. And uh, but he had no use for Mackenzie King. Mackenzie King had been the Prime Minister of Canada, the liberal prime minister. And so I would ask my mother questions I'd say, why is father doesn't have any use for Mackenzie King. And my mother would well he wouldn't fight for us in the first world war Mackenzie King went down to the United States and settled labour disputes and your father went overseas and risked his life for the country. And I said, "Well but Mackenzie King was really too old to serve wasn't he at that stage?" And my mother said, "Well that doesn't make any difference to your father." So, I said, I told you I was a bit mischievous and I said well but mom father's a liberal and Mackenzie King's a liberal and my mother looked at me and she said your father is a very conservative liberal. So when I got involved at UBC in a mock parliament, I was 17 years of age. I got involved in a mock parliament and the issue was should Canada have a brigade in Europe. And I sat with the conservatives and argued very strongly that we should have a brigade in Europe because it was only a matter of time because the Soviets would attack or do something bad. The irony of all this is that I ended up in 1953, that would've been 1949, in the Canadian brigade in Germany, the very brigade I argued for when I was 17 years of age on the campus. Now you've got to remember in those days, the word conservative and the word liberal did not have with them, with those words the uh the nastiness that has gone with the way the American media and some Americans have used those two words. I don't want to get into American politics but uh you know Anglo Canadian history is very much a case of what I think was sensible middle of the road conservatism but one of things that conservatives in Anglo Canadian history always talked about was a liberal democracy. These words weren't that antagonistic to each other at the time,

CS: It was the progressive conservative party at the time

JF: Well there was a leader of the conservative party who many years before had decided that the conservative party would be more appealing to Canadians if it as called the progressive conservative party because the attack on the conservative party was that they were all rich and all people that didn't care about anyone else which of course wasn't true. So he changed the name to progressive conservative and I used to get reminded of this and I would say well wait a minute do you know any history? And whoever I was talking to

would say well what do you mean? And I said do you know who John A. MacDonald was? And they would say well yes he put the country together. And I say do you know what he called the conservative party under his leadership? The liberal conservative party. [laughs]

CS: It was 1972 when you were first elected to represent what was then Vancouver South and-

JF: I first ran in 1968 against Arthur Lang. And Arthur Lang was a friend of my father's and vice versa

[40 minutes]

JF: And I had a tremendous regard for Arthur Lang but here I was running against him. Uh but he was quite nice to be during the election. I wasn't going to beat him in 1968. But he wasn't running in 1972 and it was different. And I had to fight very hard to get the nomination even. And uh and then I then I was running a very good man who has been a friend of mine for many many years now. That's Gordon Gibson. That wasn't an easy election but I managed to squeak through and then I was there for 21 years.

CS: And you were first in the cabinet under the Mulroney government or earlier?

JF: No, under Joe Clark.

CS: Tell me a little about that your 21 years in politics and your various roles.

JF: Well when Joe Clark became a minority leader in the House of Commons, he had to form a cabinet and uh he asked me to he knew of my long-standing concern of conservation and the environment so he asked me to literally create a department of environment. Or pull together the different pieces of it, which I did. He also because I was known to be sympathetic to labour, after all I worked in sawmills and logging camps all during my teens. I had some idea what real hard work was and I also knew that we needed to have unions. That doesn't mean I agreed with everything unions did but I was a supporter of the union movement and I also had studied labour law at university and I knew all about the [Taft fail case?] in Great Britain just at the end of 1800s which finally gave British working people a chance to organize together. So, Prime Minister Clark asked me if I would be the Postmaster General because he thought I could settle all the problems in the post office. So that was my start now we were only a government for a year and bit and then of course we went back into opposition. And then when Mulroney became the Prime Minister, the first thing is he asked me to be the Minister of Fisheries. I had been doing a lot of work in conversation, environment, and fisheries on my own as a member of parliament with other people. So that wasn't really a surprise.

CS: And when did you become Speaker of the House?

JF: Well, I got into a lot of difficulty after I was Minister of Fisheries. And uh there was a company that was canning tuna in in eastern Canada, eastern seaboard, and the government inspectors for whatever reason decided that tuna was tainted. It wasn't as clean or pure as it ought to be. And they were trying to close the company down. And I was the Minister. And I went down there, I also got scientific advice and I said this is nonsense, we're not gonna put hundreds of people out of work because of an argument over the word tainted. And I also was completely convinced on information I got that there was no threat to human health at all. But the thing blew up and Mulroney and others around him thought it would be better if I was no longer in Cabinet. So, I left cabinet and the interesting part of that I didn't leave because I wanted to, I left because I had to. And there was some awful

nonsense talked at the time. Anyway many months later, the then Speaker of the House of Commons was having problems and both sides of the House wanted him to withdraw. Which he did, which all of a sudden set a situation where there was no Speaker in the House.

[45 minutes]

JF: And we'd had a quite remarkable guy named Jim McGraw, who was a Tory, and some others, who had decided that they would recommend to government that from now any new speaker should be elected by all the members in the House of Commons, not the Cabinet Ministers but all of the members. So people came to me and said would you stand? I first, I said no, secondly I got talked into it. So to make a long story short we had an election, started at two o'clock in the afternoon and ended at 2 o'clock in the morning and uh I ended up with the most votes for the Speaker of the House of Commons for -

CS: And that was an all-party vote?

JF: That was every party. Everybody in it. And I'll tell you a funny thing because the after the after the vote and I'm now in the speaker's chair, John Turner, who was the leader of the Liberal Party, and I've known, I'd know Turner for years we were always on, we didn't always agree but we were always on good personal terms. And he caught my eye so I had to [speaking-unclear] the Honourable leader of the opposition so he got up and he said, now he said through you Mr. Speaker I want to make an announcement especially to my own party, and he turned and looked behind him. I want to congratulate you on receiving the vote to be Speaker of our House and I want my own members to know that this is the only time I've ever voted for a Tory. [laughs] So -

CS: Great story.

JF: Well it's a humorous story.

CS: Let's go back and talk about the redress settlement. I first met you I think, it must have been 1983/1984 when you were in opposition and through a friend who said that you had a great understanding and a passion of the issues around the internment of Canadians of Japanese descent. I met with you up in Parliament Hill. I don't know if you remember that it was St. John's Baptist Day and the Hill was closed and you were gracious enough to spend an afternoon with me. The purpose of the meeting was - I did not there were odd things happening at the time we didn't know who was on what side and somehow information was being leaked to the Liberal Party in power at the time. Every time we tried to do something, somebody would try to undermine those efforts and I wanted somebody in the opposition to understand what was going on our side of things and I'll never forget that discussion with you. And you asked me some very good questions at the time. And you shared with me a little bit of your personal background. So I knew you that that first of all you had a tremendous understanding and tremendous empathy for the justice issues that were involved so and you didn't say that you would watch things for me but I've always suspected that you did and it was out of a personal passion. So could you just share with me, from the point of where you were uh in opposition to the point where you were in government and you were Speaker of the House, what was going on that you can talk about the whole redress movement and what role did you play in that?

JF: Well, the first thing that I think has to be clearly understood is that redress didn't happen just because of me. Um there were people who didn't want it in both, in all parties I

think. Although may not have been as many many in the NDP. But I didn't do it by myself. You have to also remember and I made reference to the fact that my father took me when I was what 12 or 13 and showed me the monument to the Canadians of Japanese origin or descent who were killed in action wearing Canadian uniforms in the First World War alongside of my father. And he said don't ever forget this. Don't ever forget this. And don't ever forget that their fathers and mothers and cousins and brothers have all been interned as enemies. And I never did forget it. It stayed it's still with me. And so the concept of redress uh was something which I thought was it didn't make up for what we'd done but what it did do was force everybody to do something officially.

[50 minutes]

JF: And from the Canadian government that at least recognized that what we had done was wrong and that this was some attempt not perhaps adequate, but some attempt to officially put on the record that we wanted to understand that it shouldn't have happened, that an awful lot of people lost everything they owned and that this was an attempt to redress a wrong. So, I used to talk about it all the time. And when I can't remember when I first realized that there were people talking within, not just within the system, but outside the system to bring about redress. I couldn't give you a date I can't if someone gave me some dates I'd probably remember but I can't remember that. But that seemed to be something you could concentrate on because it was specific. It wasn't just getting up in some political science class and making another speech about citizenship and equality and all that sort of thing. Which are important things but- so that's as the as the discussion across the country was taking place across the country on redress and remember I had constituents who had come back to British Columbia after the war after the internment who would talk to me and these were constituents who were Canadians but they were of Japanese origin or descent and they would talk to me about these things. So, I was not just getting what I got from my mother and father and my a-ma in Japan when I was a little baby but I was also getting information from people who were affected. And the other thing to keep in mind is something that also gets forgotten. Some of the Canadians of Japanese origin who came to see me were very very concerned about the redress movement. And they may have thought it was wonderful thing if it could every happen but they were very worried about whether they were going to have to live through prejudice and nastiness if this was perused. And my instinct about these people when I met with them perhaps I had no more than half a dozen but I'd have them in my office or at their home was that they probably would hope that yes we could have redress but they didn't want go through what we had what they thought they'd have to go through to get it.

CS: There were great concerns about potential backlash.

JF: Potential backlash is a very good way of putting it. And I had to be very gentle with them because they knew where I was and what they were trying to do was warn me. And also I don't think that they were really trying to tell me how terrible it had all been the internment and everything but in their concern for all of the nastiness happening again, it became very apparent to me how deeply affected these people were. And interestingly enough most of the people who did come to see to talk to me were not younger people, they were not teenagers or event in their twenties, these were older more mature men and women.

CS: Up on Parliament Hill, what were the obstacles what were the challenges for you in championing, and hope that's not too strong of word but I think that's what you did. What were the obstacles and how did you overcome the opposition from your own party and from the other parties?

JF: Well first of all it's like anything else it wasn't everybody on one side and everyone else on the other it wasn't that simple. I mean one of the arguments that I had with senior officials and this may sound incredible was well how does that affect the budget? How much is it going to cost? Now look if you're an administrator for the government it doesn't matter what political party the government is in, you're supposed to ask those questions. But the trouble is that the question would then get in the hands of some of the other MPs.

[55 minutes]

JF: And they would be coming at me in a in a discussion about well look you can't just this is all very well to have redress but John it's going to cost millions and millions of dollars and whose got millions and millions of dollars to throw away and there's a lot of other things we could be spending money on. And if you stop and think for a minute that is a very serious argument for somebody who has to get elected. However, I just said this is a priority issue. You can take a number of issues in which we've got to do something. But I said this is clearly a priority issue because it affects what we are as a country. And it goes right to the heart of what citizenship means. It also goes right to the very centre of do we have any feelings for what these people went through. Then the other argument was well of course they're not say how they feel now but of course how do you know weren't half of them potential saboteurs? And my argument is well the RCMP and the police and everybody else can't give us any evidence to that extent. And I said even if there were a few there clearly weren't very many. And uh I was also able to argue from the - I carried some influence with these people because I was born in Japan my father had lived there for many years. I knew quite a bit about the background and what had happened and I knew quite a bit about what had happened during the internment. There was also another thing, I went to a logging camp up in the interior when I was about 15 and it was a camp in which during the war, a number of Japanese were sent and they had their own buildings and they worked as loggers and as saw mill operators. Now this is shortly after the war ended and they were there and they found out I was born in Japan and they couldn't do enough to be nice to me. I was very taken by the fact that they were so kind to me despite the fact that they had been interned, and now, they weren't interned at this point but they were living in some of the buildings that they had worked out when they were interned. And uh so without intruding too much I would try to get them to talk, and at one point one of the tractors broke down and one of the men who knew how to fix it happened to be Canadian Japanese and I was sent by the foreman to go help him and work with him for a couple of days. So, after I got to know him a bit, I asked him about it. And he said what do you know about all that. Well I knew a great deal which took him by surprise and I said how do you feel about it? And he said, "I am very bitter very very bitter. But no what you think I am bitter about. I'm bitter because Canada wouldn't let me fight for Canada." He said, "I grew up with Smokey Smith, who by the way, later he won the Victoria Cross in Italy in Seaforth Highlanders of Canada. I grew up with Smokey Smith and went to school with him and of course Smokey Smith enlisted and we all went down to enlist but they wouldn't take me

and they wouldn't take anybody else who was Japanese." He said, "That is why I am really angry." I said well what about the internment and he said, "Well it was wrong but he said people were afraid." Now again that expression of fear and uh I said what do you think of the claim put out by some, because there was a member of parliament I won't use his name cause he was otherwise a very great guy, he was in the Royal Canadian Navy and before he was sent to the Atlantic he was operating on the pacific coast and he was involved so he said with rounding Japanese fishing boats, Canadian Japanese fishing boats. And what he told me is that they all had machine guns in them. And I said to him I said did you see any of these machine guns. Well no but we know that's what was there. Now he was a young man then.

[60 minutes]

JF: And I think he was completely wrong but that was there. That attitude. So anyway I'm working with this fellow and uh [laughs] I said what about these claims that there were so many Japanese who were - who would have been saboteurs and would have acted and hoped the Japanese would land. And he said, "There probably were a few but he said I didn't know any of them." And he said, "I got a very interesting visit from the RCMP one day and they came and sat down with me and they said we think you might be in some danger and we think you ought to know about it." And I said well what were they getting at? And he showed me a list of half a dozen names who they said Japanese, pro Japanese Canadians, had decided would be eliminated as soon as the Japanese landed and as he said, "I said I was on that list." Now that's the only evidence I've ever seen or heard that there was anything underground going on of any extent.

CS: Oh I think there were probably similar issues on Canadians of German descent in in -

JF: Well there were but we didn't -

CS: And maybe some Italian descent.

JF: Well yeah but we didn't round them up - Remember this. We rounded up Ukrainians in the first war but I mean it's not that I can't understand how it happened, it's just that it shouldn't have happened. and if more people had just said this mustn't be uh it might not have happened. But when people say how could otherwise decent people in a democracy like in Canada with all its idealism and there is we're not perfect but there is a lot of idealism about this country, how could they do it. And I just come back well there was racial prejudice, there was other things, but fear was the dominant thing that moved our politicians and certainly in Vancouver, our council you know to turn the light out in the monument to the Canadian Japanese that had died fighting for us in the first war.

CS: Now I'm sure that you're bound by Cabinet secrecy but I remember reading in the millennium edition of Macleans magazine, the year 2000 and a number of prominent Canadians were asked what was your single Canadian moment and they asked you and I remember your answer was that when the Prime Minister made the announcement of the redress settlement, he insisted that he would only do it if you were present and that told me that you must have had a significant role in pushing that redress settlement over the finish line. I know you're a modest man and I'm going to push you a little on this because that to me was incredible that someone of your accomplishment and your record of public service would name that as your as single Canadian moment in Macleans magazine so go

back and tell me how that happened in the year leading up to the announcement of the redress settlement and why did the Prime Minister feel that way?

JF: Well of course I talked to the Prime Minister about it. And anybody who's been as prominent as Mr. Mulroney in Canadian politics and history, well that's some people who are nay sayers about him and others who are very strong supporters. And he's probably made some mistakes he wishes he hadn't made. But I'd known him a long time before he became Prime Minister, I first knew him when he was a very active student a young progressive conservative and Mulroney had a lot of decency in him. He also had remember this remember this is a Roman Catholic, white, Canadian growing up in Quebec and yet his insistence on doing everything he could to make sure that French Canadians were part of the country as well goes right to the fact that –

[65 minutes]

JF: He didn't learn French until he went to college, he went, he went to a university where where he would learn French. He did his legal students in French in Quebec. He was somebody who say look you got to bring people together. Now did he always succeed in that? No probably not but he believed in it. And I never felt I ever had any problem with Mulroney at all. In the early discussions, which eventually lead to the discussion of redress started to get used. Mulroney wasn't my problem. Mulroney's problem was some of the people in our own caucus, and not just in our caucus there were others in other places. And what starts to make things change is that endless discussion go on among a plethora of other issues. And as long as you keep in those discussion bringing this up and pushing it somebody else picks it up and somebody else. And after a while you find that you got a number of people who are thinking the same way. And the ones that are opposed to it are saying almost nothing when the discussion comes up. That was the thing that made me that convinced me that we could win this thing, it wasn't gonna be easy, but the people opposed to it stopped saying it, stopped arguing it. Now I could name a number of people who felt very strongly about this and then I would leave some out. But I wasn't all by myself. I think I helped because I never left the issue alone.

CS: That is key to me, you kept pushing it. It was not a popular issue it was not a popular issue even among our own community and all the priorities of government, you kept this issue alive and kept pushing it.

JF: Well Okay, I was born in Japan remember I was raised by a mother and father who had great respect for the Japanese people. I was old enough, not old enough to get into the second world war, but old enough to know that when that air raid siren went and the blackout went and everything else, it was Japanese bombs were gonna drop on us if they got here. I was old enough to know that thousands of Canadians of Japanese origin or descent were being rounded up and interned. And I listened to a father every night who was very much opposed to it, said it was wrong. So, by the time I was in my mid teens, I wasn't a convert to the cause, I was part of it. Now that isn't the only thing I was concerned about my any means but it never went away.

CS: The injustice of it, as a Canadian, and a very proud Canadian, was it a justice issue for you at the end of it?

JF: Well it was a human issue and but it was very clearly a justice issue. I mean a government in our system can do just about anything even with the Charter of Rights can

do almost anything if it has a majority and insists on doing it. And if it can raise enough reasons why it has to be done. But to me it was it was a justice, it was a justice issue in the sense of the meaning of the word justice, not in a procedural sense but in the long-term historical sense of what is justice. What is right. And there is an old Latin maxim [speaking Latin] let right be done though the heavens fall. And that's the kind of justice I'm talking about.

CS: You mentioned earlier in your view this issue and redressing the wrongs and the internment were really something that defined us as Canadians. Whether we could do it was going to help define what it meant to be Canadian. What essential rights a Canadian had and my perception, your background aside, that must have been front of mind for you.

JF: Well it was it was something that I thought we had to do if we really believe in what most of us think being Canadian is.

[70 minutes]

JF: But there was another side to it too. We had to make up for what we did. I mean interning all these people was wrong. And the only way you can right a wrong is first of all admit that it was wrong and then if the consequences were very serious in terms of hurt and financial loss and that sort of thing that you have to try to do something about that. And here of course is where the Americans were better than we were. There are a lot of Canadians you know who think we're a lot better than Americans but the Americans let the American Japanese, the Japanese Americans fight for their country. We wouldn't do that. Now that to me was part of what we did wrong, not just the internment, but the fact that these young men were prepared to fight for Canada, we wouldn't let them do it.

CS: The American government also could not confiscate the property of American citizens. It's their constitutional right. Canadian born Japanese were stripped of all their property. It's another reason.

JF: Well if a long time ago we persuaded some people in another political party other than my own to put property rights in the Charter of Rights I argued at the time there was a reason for having property rights in the Charter of Rights [laughs]

CS: And we don't.

JF: And we still don't have it. Let's get off on that subject.

CS: But when you look back on this what lessons do you take from it and what would you say to Canadians about this experience and your role in as a politician and as a leader. And as a, I think, a very courageous politician.

JF: Well what I would say to young people who are considering going into public life is that uh, don't go into it just because it's something to do. You better have some reasons. And because a lot of it can be very disappointing and sometimes you can you can see people you thought supported you fade away and vice versa so you gotta believe in something. Now if you believe in something you gotta have the guts to fight for it. It does come down to fundamental things like straight courage to go and do it. Now if you believe in something and you've got the courage to do something you also gotta have the skill to be effective. Not everybody's got eh same skills but it's important to put those three things together and you should never give up.

CS: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us in this interview?

JF: Well there have been times when I have been critical of governments and I've been critical of my own party, and I can be critical of things Canada did or didn't do. But I'm very Canadian and it goes back to 1758 when the Highlanders in the 78th Fraser Highlanders landed in North American under General Wolf and we've been here ever since. Now we've tried to, along with a lot of other people, to make the country what it is.

[End of interview]