

Helen Clark

Contributed by Lachlan
Sunday, 22 July 2007

Rt. HON HELEN CLARK

PRIME MINISTER
12 February 2002

Chinese New Year Celebration

It is my pleasure this evening to welcome all our guests to this celebration of Chinese New Year at Parliament. I extend a special welcome to all guests from the Chinese community, many of whom have travelled from other parts of New Zealand to be with us this evening.

In the Chinese calendar, 2002 is the Year of the Horse. Those born in this year are said to be cheerful, popular, wise, hard working, and good with money. Our special good wishes this evening go to all those born under the sign of the horse.

Chinese New Year is the oldest and most important festival in the Chinese calendar. These days with New Zealand's significant and growing Chinese population it is also an important festival in the New Zealand calendar. For us all, it is an opportunity to see the richness of Chinese culture and to celebrate the diversity of culture in New Zealand today.

There was of course a time when New Zealand was fearful of cultural diversity and distinctly unwelcoming to migrants of Chinese descent in particular. That was so despite Chinese people being among the earliest migrants to New Zealand. Chinese came to the goldfields in the 1860s, around the same time as my great, great grandparents did. The open air museum at Arrowtown today tells us something of the lives they lived and the hardships they endured.

In the late nineteenth century, the New Zealand Parliament passed discriminatory laws against Chinese seeking to enter New Zealand. The Chinese Immigrants Act of 1881 imposed a poll tax of ten pounds per Chinese person and restricted the numbers able to enter the country to one person per ten tonnes of ship cargo. In 1896 the tax was lifted to one hundred pounds per person and there were further restrictions on the numbers of Chinese able to enter New Zealand.

No other ethnic group was subjected to such restrictions or to a poll tax. Other legislative initiatives also singled out the Chinese.

In 1908, Chinese people had to put a thumbprint on their Certificates of Registration before leaving the country - no other ethnic group had to leave thumbprints.

Chinese people were deprived of their right to naturalisation in 1908 and this was not rescinded until 1951. No other ethnic group was deprived of this right.

A reading test in English was introduced - other immigrants had only a writing test in their own language. Even in 1935 when entry permits were introduced after a suspension of 15 years for reunification of family and partners of Chinese people, they were severely restricted.

There were those who spoke against the passing of the poll tax legislation. They included journalists, members of the House of Representatives, and members of the Legislative Council. Quotes from these people are on the displays here tonight. Chinese people organised petitions against the poll tax, and one backed by the great majority of Chinese residents was sent to the King via the Governor-General.

Many Chinese suffered the indignity of the poll tax and the other restrictions. Arrivals in the port of Wellington between 1888 to 1930 numbered around 2100 people. In total, the estimated number who paid the poll tax between 1882 and 1930 was 4,500. The tax was not abolished until 1944. At that time, the Minister of Finance, Walter Nash referred to the "removing of the blot on our legislation" and affirmed that the government would not in future countenance any discrimination against Chinese people in New Zealand.

Nine years ago the New Zealand Chinese Association commissioned Nigel Murphy to undertake historical research on the poll tax. His work was completed in 1994 and published in 1995. Discussion followed on seeking a formal apology from the New Zealand Government for the discrimination suffered by those subjected to the poll tax and other practices. I recall this matter being raised with me at a meeting of the New Zealand Federation of Ethnic Councils in 1999, and it has been raised since with the Minister for Ethnic Affairs, the Hon George Hawkins. I wish to announce today that the government has decided to make a formal apology to those Chinese people who paid the poll tax and suffered other discrimination imposed by statute and to their descendants.

With respect to the poll tax we recognise the considerable hardship it imposed and that the cost of it and the impact of other discriminatory immigration practices split families apart.

Today we also express our sorrow and regret that such practices were once considered appropriate. While the governments which passed these laws acted in a manner which was lawful at the time, their actions are seen by us today as unacceptable. We believe this act of reconciliation is required to ensure that full closure can be reached on this chapter in our nation's history.

The Government's apology today is the formal beginning to a process of reconciliation. The Minister of Ethnic Affairs and I have been authorised to pursue with representatives of the families of the early settlers a form of

reconciliation which would be appropriate to and of benefit to the Chinese community. To that end we wish to meet with key representatives of the descendants to discuss the next step in this process of reconciliation. The New Zealand Chinese Association, representing many of the descendants of the Chinese who paid the poll tax, has suggested that it may be appropriate for the government to make a contribution in the form of funds and resources for the purpose of restoring and maintaining the Chinese heritage, culture and language in New Zealand which was severely eroded as a result of the injustice of the poll tax and other discriminatory policies. The government looks forward to engaging further with the New Zealand Chinese Association and other descendants' representatives to discuss such proposals.

Each year as Minister for Arts and Culture I have organised an essay competition for secondary school students on an aspect of New Zealand history. This year, in recognition of the Government's move to offer a formal apology for the discrimination imposed by statute on Chinese people in the past, essays are invited on the history of the Chinese in New Zealand. The winners will be invited to a reception with the Prime Minister and members of the Chinese community and presented with copies of James Ng's beautiful work *Windows on a Chinese Past*.

Through the essay writing initiative we hope to ensure that this little known aspect of New Zealand history is better understood by present generations.

Today's New Zealand Government both recognises and values the importance of the Chinese community in New Zealand. The community is making a huge economic and social contribution to our country. The many new Chinese migrants are also bringing new ideas, a strong work ethic, and valuable contacts with their countries of origin.

Modern New Zealand has a bicultural foundation, and today is home to many peoples. It is important that we value, honour, and respect all our communities and see our diversity as a great strength. For that reason it is a great pleasure to me to be hosting this Chinese New Year celebration here at Parliament and to wish the Chinese community a very happy New Year. Gung Hei Fat Choy!