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Contributed by Lachlan
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THE POLL TAX APOLOGY/THE PRIME MINISTERIAL APOLOGY FOR THE CHINESE POLL-TAX

The Year of the Horse (which started on 12 February 2002) should be an auspicious year for New Zealand's Chinese community. On Chinese New Year's Day, the Prime Minister hosted a celebratory party in Parliament House for community representatives around the nation, and made a surprise apology for the historic wrong inflicted on the Chinese by the poll-tax and other racially discriminatory restrictions. When Helen Clark gave that formal acknowledgement of past legislative injustices, she put New Zealand ahead of the United States, Canada, and Australia in its admission of similar anti-Chinese historic wrongs. In doing so, she paved the way for the nation to come to terms with an integral part of its history, thereby getting it more ready to move forward to the future with one particular shackle shaken free.

It was not widely known even amongst the knowledgeable that New Zealand imposed the hated poll-tax on the Chinese. While Australia achieved a racist notoriety amongst Asian states for its overt 'White Australian Policy', New Zealand continued to be regarded as a generally friendly and racially tolerant nation. In reality, New Zealand's poll-tax policy was already in place in 1881, and remained in force until 1944, a period considerably longer than those imposed by both our Australia and Canada.

I remember my own personal shock and dismay on discovering that New Zealand had a hidden chapter of anti-Chinese prejudices enshrined by formal legislation, foremost of which was the series of poll-tax laws. In the early 1980s, as a young history PhD visiting Beijing, I was asked to "write a short article on Chinese settlement in New Zealand" by a couple of eminent historians. I imagined it to be a relatively easy task. But, to my frustration, none of the standard histories of New Zealand written by our foremost historians had more than a sentence or two on the Chinese. Undeterred, I went to the Auckland Archives, determined to look for the original documents marking Chinese migration.

A helpful archivist brought out two old boxes marked "Labour Department, Chinese". The boxes held "Re-entry permits" and big, formal photographs of Chinese men, all stamped with red wax seals of New Zealand Customs. Every permit was thumb-printed (some even bore prints of all ten fingers), and besides the height, physical scars and visible characteristics of the holder, it bore the name of a guarantor. The Chinese were clearly under very strict surveillance. Each document gave permission for the holder to re-enter New Zealand only if he already had a "poll-tax certificate" of a certain number.

To this day I can still remember the chill that crept up my spine in spite of the warmth of the afternoon sun in that dusty Auckland archive reading room. When I looked through those turn-of-the-century documents, it was as if I was looking into some dark secrets of the past. I had an overwhelming sense of unease, confusion and non-comprehension. How could New Zealand, my chosen country, which was apparently so tolerant and egalitarian in every way, be so anti-Chinese?

Returning to the history department of Auckland University, I went and spoke to Keith Sinclair, our professor of New Zealand history. He had not come across any of those documents, he said. A poll-tax? Well, probably there was one.

Next, I went to the National Archive in Wellington, at that time located in an old building in Vivian Street. When I opened the boxes and stared at all those poll-tax stub books, volume after volume: older ones with thumbprints, more recent ones with photographs, my tears flowed. I cried not only for the great injustices and humiliation suffered by my fellow Chinese, but also for this shameful chapter of the history of my adopted country. These poll tax stub books, which encapsulate the hardship of Chinese entry and the racial discrimination they suffered, changed the direction of my research career. What followed has been nearly two decades of continuous study on the New Zealand Chinese as well as related issues on Asian migration.

How New Zealand treated the Chinese was out of character of its treatment of other migrants. The Chinese were the only people the Government made pay a poll-tax for entry into New Zealand. By the 1881 Chinese Immigrants Act, every Chinese was required to pay a poll tax of 10 pounds. The 1896 Amendment raised the amount to 100 pounds. 100 pounds was an astronomical amount in nineteenth century New Zealand, when the average weekly wage was counted more in shillings than in pounds.

The poll-tax was intended to be a very blunt instrument to restrict Chinese entry, who were viewed as alien, heathen, and undesirable. They were labeled "the Yellow Peril" which threatened the racial purity of a new country which aspired to be "a Better Britain of the South Seas". The Chinese, on the other hand, entertained very little hope of settling in New Zealand. Long used to being loathed and unwelcome by white settler countries, all they aspired to was to become successful sojourners. Before the 1900s it was the gold fields that lured them, after that it was the prospect of making money in market gardening, running laundries and fruit shops. Their humble aspiration was to supply menial labour in niche sectors not serviced by white settlers. The target amount of lifetime saving of each Chinese person was precisely the amount of the poll-tax: 100 pounds.

From 1881 to 1934, the Chinese poll tax yielded around 308.080 pound-sterling for the New Zealand government. All Chinese: men, women and children needed to pay the poll tax to enter. exorbitant tax divided families for generations. Women were left behind in the home villages because it was deemed economically unsound to spend 100 pounds to bring out a wife. Boys were usually sent for by their fathers or uncles, when they reached their teens.

The poll tax ensured that the New Zealand Chinese community was kept a community of bachelors, unable to grow, and incapable of sinking roots for decades. Only when the Japanese invaded China in the late 1930s, were the families of New Zealand Chinese men temporarily allowed to join their husbands and fathers on humanitarian grounds.

When Walter Nash formally abolished the poll tax in 1944, he expressed pleasure in "removing … the blot on our legislation." By then, the poll tax had not been active for ten years. Noting the effort of China's war of resistance against Japan, he concluded that "we are merely saying that the Chinese are as good as any other race, and that we will not in future countenance any discrimination against them." The issue of the poll tax lay dormant for many decades. But it would be wrong to assume that it was ever forgotten. The New Zealand Chinese Association commissioned Nigel Murphy, a librarian of the Turnbull Library, to chronicle the poll tax saga in 1994.

The xenophobia and anti-immigrant outcry of the 1990s awakened a sense of deja vu among Chinese New Zealanders. Many felt that an official admission of the wrongs wrought by the poll tax could be a first step in establishing the rightful position of the Chinese in New Zealand. Monetary reparation to individuals was never on the agenda. But those who do not learn their lessons from history properly are condemned to repeat old mistakes. It was hoped that the government would admit responsibility on principle, and there could be wider recognition of the perils of racism and the horrific suffering inflicted on generations of Chinese families. The current Labour Government has been astute enough to see that a formal acknowledgement of past wrongs might capture the hearts and votes of the Chinese community. Ever since the arrival of the "new Asian wave" in the early 1990s, these new migrants were widely regarded as potential National Party supporters, largely because of their middle-class background, comparative affluence, and business interest. Probably, the Labour Party has never quite forgotten that local born Chinese New Zealanders were once their staunch supporters. After World War II, in 1947, it was another Labour Government that allowed the Chinese refugee wives and children to become permanent residents of this country. Longstanding Chinese families have usually reciprocated with bloc votes.

This recent apology about the poll tax is not without controversy. Some Chinese viewed it as an election year ploy, while others lamented the lack of wider consultation, especially with the direct descendents of the poll tax victims. These concerns and criticisms are legitimate. However, an official apology is a step forward, and as such, should be supported by all. The apology would be more meaningful if it is followed by an educational programme to ensure that such a sorry chapter of New Zealand history is never forgotten. It remains to be seen whether this poll tax apology will have any significant impact on the upcoming election at the end of 2002. But ultimately, it is important to take a longer-term perspective. Governments come and go, but people who make up a nation remain. Initiatives which help to ensure better understanding towards ethnic minorities and heighten public awareness of past mistakes should be encouraged. And it is in this spirit that we should applaud the prime ministerial apology for the poll tax.

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