

# Pansy Wong

Contributed by Lachlan  
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Do we have to ask the Chinese?

Thousands of Chinese who came to New Zealand over many decades faced legally sanctioned discrimination. Quite simply the law said Chinese had to pay a special poll tax to live in New Zealand. The law applied to no one else and over the years Chinese were required to pay more and more for the privilege.

Today, as we try to create a shared future, we struggle to come to terms with the demons of our past. Bearing in mind that historic Treaty grievances loom large on the collective radar, Chinese ask how they can move on. Some Chinese do not want to mention the past for fear of attracting a backlash. Others feel an acknowledgement or apology would forge reconciliation. Others argue there should be monetary compensation.

As New Zealand's only Asian and Chinese MP I am often a lone voice for our community, which has never been one to create a fuss. But there are times when someone must speak out.

The Clark government is aware of the poll tax issue but ignorant of the depth of feelings and divided opinions. It has been secretly putting together a package. There has been scant consultation with those affected because it has been convenient for the Government to low-ball the issue in the wider public eye while trying to stage an announcement for Chinese ears only to coincide with Chinese New Year on 12 February.

An issue as potent as this is for the Chinese communities that have been simmering for over 100 years should demand wider consultation if there is to be genuine reconciliation. There are many individuals and Chinese community organisations who have thus far been ignored.

More importantly, the wider New Zealand community needs to be made aware and understand the issue. Without an open, robust process this redress is likely to set back the generally good relationship between the established Chinese communities and the wider communities.

New Zealanders are fair-minded provided they are furnished with details and understand the issues. Blatant electioneering and a unilateral announcement of redress will not "buy" a shared future, but will invite resentment and possibly a backlash against the Chinese communities.

The majority of the people affected would want their stories told, recorded, understood and would like their dignity and worth as New Zealanders to be finally acknowledged.

But it seems they will have as little to say today as they did some 120 years ago when in 1881 the Chinese Immigration Act was passed. That imposed a 10 pound entry tax on every Chinese immigrant to New Zealand. It blatantly contravened international treaties between the United Kingdom and China, and was imposed against the protests of the New Zealand Chinese community.

The tax was raised to 100 pounds in 1896. Quotas were also imposed by tonnage of shipping. New Zealand was the most restrictive Commonwealth nation (apart from South Africa). One Chinese immigrant was permitted for every 100 tons of shipping.

The Chinese population of New Zealand was accordingly reduced from 5,004 in 1881 to 2,887 by 1901. The Government continued to pursue a deliberate discriminatory strategy of reducing the numbers in the Chinese communities. By 1901, only 15 Chinese were women in New Zealand.

In 1944 the tax was officially waived, but Chinese communities were not consulted even then.

Late last year, 120 years after the imposition of the poll tax, Ethnic Affairs Minister George Hawkins asked selected Chinese community organisations to make secret submissions in great haste to redress the poll tax just before Christmas.

The courage and confidence of Chinese community organisations who choose to stand up and demand that the Government back off from any unilateral announcement on the issue should be applauded.

They want to be treated no more and no less than any citizen who has the right to be consulted, not just to be told as to what is good for them.

The Chinese Community does not exist to rubber-stamp Labour's guilty conscience. Labour Union leaders in New Zealand of old, were among the greatest agitators against the Chinese in New Zealand.

National acknowledged the existence of institutionalised racial discrimination against Chinese migrants.

The process of letting the Chinese communities members know of past injustices, of letting the wider community learn from history is a priority. Without this transparent and open process, the wounds would not heal properly.

The Labour Government's ill-considered rush action would open new wounds on two fronts: continual failure to deal with the members of Chinese communities in a genuine partnership process and the imposition of redress of past grievance on the wider community without proper time frame for consultation and understanding.

Maori would not permit themselves to be handled in this manner. But then, Chinese cannot ride the juggernaut of indigenous law as Maori can, even though many Chinese in the 19th century were as much victims of British

imperialism and bad faith.

National wants members of Chinese communities, especially those, which are affected by poll tax and also their descendants, to be consulted over the poll tax issue. We would set up a special Parliamentary Select Committee to inquire into Retribution of Poll Tax, which would empower to receive oral and written submissions, personal stories and make recommendations on appropriate means of addressing the issues. The individuals affected and relevant organisations deserve to have their stories told, recorded and the wider community does need to know of these to reflect upon for us to move on. The indecent haste of election year politics is not the way to move on.

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