

Paul Wah

Contributed by Lachlan
Sunday, 22 July 2007

Features Editor
The Dominion
Wellington

As a 3rd generation Chinese New Zealander I wish to comment on the reported apology by Helen Clark for the imposition of the infamous poll tax of 1890-1926 and the reported stitching together of a government financial compensation package.

My grandparents migrated to NZ in the early 1900's from China and Australia respectively, each paying the crippling poll tax of £100 each and endured the hardships and indignities suffered by other new Chinese settlers at that time.

I still recall my grandmother as a highly intelligent and perceptive person, who adapted well despite all difficulties. She counselled me to be optimistic in the belief that times for me and my children would be better, as eventually white people would outgrow their bigotry and ignorance towards us so that we would all have an equal place in NZ society.

The anti-discrimination laws passed in the 1970's, better education, greater prosperity and the free intermingling of people across international boundaries has relegated the bigoted attitudes of the past to the pages of history. Our children have freedom, opportunity, freedom and success. They are the lucky true inheritors of the great NZ dream. Some are aware of the injustices of the past, and none that I know carry the grievances of history within their breast determined to find an opportunity to make somebody pay.

We are adamant the sins of Richard John Seddon and politicians of the past are not a debt for which the government of today is accountable. My family carries the grievances of the past very lightly on their shoulders. Too much should not be made of Helen Clark's apology as the wrongs and injustices of the past are self-evident. Such public self-flagellation serves little purpose and can only be seen as a cynical attempt at vote catching in an election year. If Ms Clark is sincere in her efforts to seek re-approachment with those aggrieved members of the Chinese community then let her Government direct the Education Ministry to write into the History and Social studies curriculum of schools a full and fair treatment of early NZ's discriminatory laws plus an analysis of how such policies had devastating effects on the families concerned.

In seeking our vindication it is important that we Chinese take a balanced viewpoint of the situation at that time. As an older person who has travelled very extensively and having lived and worked in China it is clear that racial intolerance, discrimination and oppression are universal and not a practice engaged by one particular race.

I am saddened that my grandparents had such a hard time gaining acceptance in NZ, more so that their aspirations were blunted in this new country of exceptional opportunity. China, in the late 1800's was ravaged by civil war, banditry, poverty and political instability. Migration to NZ despite the poll tax and discrimination offered a better life than from whence they had come. For this they were grateful.

I have greatest difficulty with some suggestion of monetary compensation. The Chinese community do not need buckets of Government (actually our money) cash.. This can be seen as the ultimate "40 pieces of silver". By accepting monetary compensation we would in a single action have joined the "grievance industry" an activity synonymous with failure, inertia and an unwillingness to accept a responsibility for one's own outcomes. The Maori grievance industry is unique as they are the indigenous people and have a fulcrum of newly enacted laws around which to litigate and clearly suffer severe handicaps which they do not seem to be able to unilaterally resolve. No such similar situation exists for the Chinese who have proven well able to advance without leaning on the State.

Of concern is that we now have a large Pacific Island minority coat-tailing the Maori grievance industry. They work via a State sponsored Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, progressively ratcheting up additional privileges for their people.

With ever increasing enclaves of ethnic communities settling in NZ, the opportunities for an expansion of groups claiming redress for past grievances (real or imagined) is considerable.

It is important to all New Zealanders that the grievance industry should be quarantined to where it now lies and we Chinese have nothing to do with extracting compensation for wrongs of a century ago.

When my generation passes on there should be none left who have experienced the harsh effects of the Poll Tax laws and associated racial discrimination.

I would like all New Zealanders to remember us as hardworking, intelligent, responsible and successful citizens who have given at least as much as they took from the land of their adoption; as people with sleeves rolled up, hands outstretched to work, but never as a people with hands out ready to receive "freebies" from fellow New Zealanders.

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