

Henry Chan

Contributed by Lachlan
 Sunday, 22 July 2007
 Last Updated Wednesday, 12 September 2007

AN AUSTRALIAN VIEW OF THE APOLOGY

Henry Chan

After my initial great and excited euphoria over Helen Clark's apology on behalf of the NZ Government and people, I became very worried as I began to receive messages, first indicating prominent NZ commentators calling for the "next step" by way of compensation, and secondly, from the various huaren sites around the world praising the apology as a great achievement of Chinese nationalistic and ethnic spirit. I am Chinese and very proud of it, but I do not necessarily need to boast about my cultural and ethnic identity in a manner of racial and ethnic superiority. I am in fact rather worried about the new rampant Chinese nationalism and culturalism which at an international conference in Singapore in 2000 I warned would bring problems to the younger generation of overseas Chinese, who will be torn by the demand they be loyal New Zealanders or Australians, and by the strident demand they be patriotic Chinese!

Money, especially for descendents, can not compensate for the humiliation and suffering of our fore bearers in New Zealand, nor any where else. Money will not help our grandfathers or our fathers. The demand for compensation will simply damage the achievements and reputation of the Chinese community that our generation have managed to achieve in Australia and New Zealand. I would caution you and my fellow New Zealand Chinese to be careful about what the "next step" actually should be.

The present Howard Government will never apologize to the Indigenous peoples in Australia and they explain why - they fear that a government apology will

lead to massive claims for monetary compensation, in many cases very justified (more so than in the case of NZ Chinese!). The majority of White Australians think that the Aboriginal peoples already receive too many benefits from the public purse in Australia and so they support the Australian government stand.

It is already being asked when will the Canadian and Australian governments now apologize to the Chinese in Canada and Australia for their poll taxes. In the Australian case I think I can safely say not in my life time and probably never!

If the NZ Chinese now pursue a claim for monetary compensation then I think it will make apologies from the Canadian and Australian government even more unlikely.

Further, though the present NZ Government is a very socially conscious one that appears favorably inclined towards Chinese and other ethnic and migrant groups, and I am much prouder to be a New Zealander than an Australian at the moment, from my observations the racial situation in New Zealand has not really improved. I can well imagine the backlash from the Pakeha and especially Maori communities if the Chinese in New Zealand appeared to be receiving special treatment and extra monetary benefit. I would think the Chinese community in New Zealand is regarded as a very rich and well-to-do one by many Pakehas and Maoris. The reality is of course very different but it is perceptions that matter most to the general public!!!!

I think you must ensure that the Chinese people who are consulted and represented are the descendants of the early Chinese migrants who suffered the poll tax. My father must have paid it, and probably my mother and I did when we arrived as war refugees in 1940? You must see that the more recent migrants do not have all the say and influence. From my

understanding, organisations such as the Tung Jung, Seyip, and older Chinese groups are much more representative than the NZ Chinese Association which I gather has been taken over by more aggressive recent Chinese arrivals?

Yes, I gather the NZ Government wishes some advice concerning some thing more tangible. Support for Chinese language and studies in schools and universities is worth considering. However, I would caution against specific Chinese schools that I have heard has been suggested. The ethnic specific schools that now proliferate in Australia are a great source of division and will eventually weaken multiculturalism in Australia. You would not wish that to occur in NZ?

I would suggest the establishment in New Zealand of a government body such as the Australia-China Council which encourages and funds academic, cultural, and people to people exchange between Australia, the PRC, and Taiwan. The ACC also supports research and cultural projects that promote mutual understanding of Australian and Chinese cultures and societies. It is very well funded by the Australian government and is at present chaired by the most distinguished Chinese Australia, Dr John Yu, AC.

John Yu is descended from one of the early Chinese settler families in Australia but like me was born in China! The AC, Commander of Order of Australia, is the highest honour awarded in Australia. It is closed order, in that there is a permanent set number of AC, and an AC has to die before another is appointed!

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18 February 2002

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