

# THE POLL TAX IMPOSED ON CHINESE IMMIGRANTS TO

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## THE POLL TAX IMPOSED ON CHINESE IMMIGRANTS TO

NEW ZEALAND  
REVIEW OF CURRENT SITUATION AND PROPOSAL FOR A RECONCILIATION PROCESS  
By STEVEN YOUNG

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Government's apology to those forced to pay the Poll Tax has been well received by the Chinese community; however the Government should better understand who the descendents of these people are and what they feel before deciding on a reconciliation process. This paper identifies the people and groups who have proper standing in this matter and who should be consulted, and suggests a process for airing their stories and grievances leading to a reconciliation and closure. A suggestion is made for creating a suitable research fund and for the inclusion of the early Chinese in the history of New Zealand. The case for individual compensation is reviewed and rejected. Finally the suggested process is related to the local and international context.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

The Prime Minister's apology on behalf of the Government to those who were forced to pay the Poll Tax, and their descendents, has been well received in the Chinese community in New Zealand, and internationally. Where the Government has faltered has been in its failure to ascertain to which community groups these people belonged, to consult these groups before the apology was made and to promise to consult them in the future when planning reconciliation.

The result has been that the apology has become too diffused. Many Chinese groups, with no connection at all with the poll taxpayers, and overseas observers have interpreted the Government's reception and apology as a greater acceptance of the Chinese in New Zealand, and in some cases gone on to misinterpret it as a triumph of Chinese economic might, nationalism and culture. Or so it appears from overseas Chinese newspaper and television reports.

The Government inadvertently erred when it assumed or accepted that the NZ Chinese Association had a mandate to speak on behalf of all the poll taxpayers and their descendents. This mandate is now being disputed by other groups with equally strong claims as being representative. These groups include the long established county associations and the churches some much older than the NZCA and to which many poll taxpayers accorded their primary loyalty (because they were members by birth or descent.)

Generally unaware of Chinese community group dynamics, the government's advisors have started to compound their initial error by populating advisory committees with the wise and the good without ensuring that the community groups generally accepted as representing the poll taxpayers and their descendents have a place, as of right.

While it must be accepted some minor claimants must miss out, the groups accepted by the Chinese community as a whole as having a mandate to represent the poll taxpayers must be represented, if reconciliation is to be finally achieved.

In the New Zealand context there are many parallels in urban Maori and iwi seeking representation in the Treaty Settlement process.

### 2. THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS

#### LISTENING TO THE PEOPLE

All those who wish to, and who can claim some standing in this matter, should be allowed to make written submissions to be formally presented individually to a properly constituted commission or a committee of Parliament with representation from all parties. The commission or committee should travel around New Zealand to receive submissions.

The Chinese New Zealanders want to speak to "the Government" (Ministers and MPs) not officials and bureaucrats.

All submissions should be published in written form in both English and Chinese (without translation).

The Commission or committee should make a written report with recommendations to be tabled in Parliament.

### 3. PERSONAL RECOGNITION OF POLL TAXPAYERS AND THEIR DESCENDENTS

Any Poll Taxpayer and their most senior and most direct descent should be recognised (if they so desire) by a personal communication from the Government, an invitation to an appropriate function in each of the four or five main centres to mark the beginning of the process. All claimants should be recognised (without accepting that

they are the rightful claimant.)

#### 4. RECOGNITION OF COMMUNITY GROUPS AS THE VOICE OF DESCENDENTS OF POLL TAXPAYERS

Most people who are qualified to speak will not wish to do so individually.

Community groups who can meet certain minimal conditions shall be allowed to present submissions representative of their members, who broadly speaking, are descendents of Poll Taxpayers. See below for definition.

These groups can themselves resolve the personal interests of individual members. For instance there may be some descendants seeking a refund of the money paid by their grandfather. Government should refuse individual requests for compensation as being inconsistent with the broader objectives of reconciliation.

#### 5. WHAT GROUPS MUST BE CONSULTED

##### INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY GROUPS REPRESENTING POLL TAXPAYERS

The early Chinese came to New Zealand mainly by a process of chain migration. This means the earliest migrants would arrange for their sons, nephews and clansmen to come, providing financial assistance for the cost of passage (and the Poll Tax in some cases) and assisting with jobs and accommodation. These people in turn would assist others in the same way when they became established. Later when women were allowed in, some would bring their wives. Because of this process, the source of migrants became localised to certain counties in southern China. In the case of migration to New Zealand these were the Tung Guan/Jung Seng, the Panyu and the Seyip areas of southern China which are close to (but not adjacent) to one another. (In other counties it became traditional to chain-migrate to Sydney or San Francisco or New York)

Clansmen in New Zealand from these counties naturally associated together, and in due course formed the

Â· Tung Jung Association

Â· Poon Far Association

Â· Seyip Association

Right up to 1950, nearly all the migrants came from these counties, and therefore qualified for membership in these associations. Their children became members by descent and continue to be so to this day.

The Baptist Church and the Anglican Church established missions in New Zealand to help the Chinese migrants.

Through their pastoral care, they built up a following among the migrants which overlapped the county associations to some extent, but also provided a group "home" for those who did not fit into the county associations structure.

In the 1970s, the influence of the county associations, and similar organisations waned as the need for their services diminished. Overt discrimination was no longer a serious problem and language was no longer a barrier to social participation. Many young people wanted to participate in sport. Thus clubs such as the Wellington Chinese Sports and Cultural Centre and the Dragon Sports Club were formed and became very active. While the young people became heavily involved in sport, their parents kept up their involvement with the county associations. But parents would support their children at sporting activities in the sports clubs and the children would support their parents in their more traditional celebration of Chinese festivals relating to the seasons, ancestors, graveside ceremonies and so on.

Thus there is a continuous unbroken line of blood between joining those who pay the poll tax, the members of the county associations and the religious/non-religious sports clubs.

The New Zealand Chinese Association, which is younger than the county associations also has a long and honourable history. Being more political in nature, at various times it became involved in the fight against racism and discrimination in New Zealand, raising funds to fight the Japanese invading China, supporting the Chinese Nationalist Government against the Communists, and latterly also generally supporting the opening up of mainland China. Over the past 20 years or so, NZCA has been most known for organising an annual sports tournament for the local Chinese and a tour to China for young Chinese.

No one Chinese organisation or individual has a mandate to speak on behalf of all Chinese. In this context if the moves toward reconciliation are to have any credibility, the views of those who were directly affected and their descendants must be given high importance.

#### 6. CRITERIA FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUPS HAVING LEGITIMATE INPUT INTO THE POLL TAX MATTERS

Â· A person who has paid the Poll Tax.

Â· The direct descendent of such person.

Â· A person whose family has been in New Zealand at least two generations and probably three generations and possibly four generations.

Other characteristics:

Â· A person whose heritage language is Cantonese.

The groups should consist predominantly of such people.

#### 7. CHARACTERISTICS OF PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONS WITHOUT STANDING

Â· People not descendants of Poll Taxpayers who arrived after 1951.

Â· People whose native Chinese dialect is Mandarin (or Putonghua).

Â· Chinese organisations formed in NZ after 1985.

An example is the (deliberately) confusingly-named Chinese Associations of New Zealand a newly-formed organisation whose members are mostly recent immigrants (of less than 25 years standing) nearly all born in (northern) China, speak Putonghua, and are interested in such matters as the reunification of China and Taiwan. Even the slightest hint of possible involvement of such organisations in Poll Tax questions will result in instant outcries of protest and insurrection from the families and descendants of the early Chinese settlers.

#### 8. LANGUAGE

It is an insult to speak to Poll Taxpayers and their descendants in Putonghua at any official function. This is official de-recognition of the Poll Taxpayer community of descendants. All descendants speak fluent English. Cantonese may be used.

#### 9. WHAT THE POLL TAYPAYERS AND THEIR DESCENDENT WANT AN ACCOUNTING

Â· A list of those officially recorded as having paid the Poll Tax.

Â· A supplementary list of those who claim to have paid the Poll Tax.

Â· A statement of the sum received each year in Poll Tax and a grand total.

Â· An official statement of the average wage in the years when the Poll Tax was imposed.

#### 10. RECOGNITION OF DAMAGE DONE

#### STORIES TOLD IN THE OFFICIAL RECORD SO THAT SUCCEEDING GENERATIONS CAN FIND IT

Official publication of personal and community stories of

Â· Financial hardship

Â· Lack of a normal family life

Â· Retardation of social integration

Â· Loss of opportunities

Â· Humiliation and contempt

Â· Loss of language and history

These bona fides of these stories (as stories) shall be accepted without question.

#### 11. INCLUSION IN THE HISTORY OF NEW ZEALAND AS TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS

A section relating to Chinese migration to New Zealand, the Poll Tax, its historical perspective and the part that the early Chinese played in building up the society of New Zealand should be included in all studies on New Zealand. New Zealand Chinese historians shall be consulted in the preparation of the material. Currently there is little or no reference to these aspects. Much of New Zealand history refers to the early miners and their work in the goldfields. There is no reference for instance to the historical importance of the market gardens or laundries. The sociological changes in the Chinese, as a key ethnic group during this period is also not documented.

#### 12. FORMAL CLOSURE

At the end of the process of hearings as determined by the commission/committee, when the submissions and stories are ready for publications, there should be a formal ceremony at Parliament when all those who consider the process to be complete will attend. (And presumably all those who disagree can protest.)

#### 13. LIVING MEMORIALS TO THE POLL TAXPAYERS RESEARCH FUND

The Government should establish an on going fund for study, research and publication whose aim is to further and

understanding of the history and culture of the Chinese in New Zealand or the development of a multicultural society in New Zealand.

This fund should be:

Â§ Contestable

Â§ Available to any organisation or individual

Â§ Allocated by a committee chaired by a Government appointee but made up of representatives of the early Chinese settlers

Â§ Subject to stringent audit requirements, group according to predetermined conditions and consistent with Government policy

An initial part of this funding should be to allow research into what other countries are doing to preserve the history of the early Chinese settlers. Australia for instance has invested substantial funds into a variety of projects throughout New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria that will all contribute to documenting, and preserving this very important of its historical heritage.

#### 15. MONETARY COMPENSATION AND WHY NOT IN THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT THE CASE FOR COMPENSATION

There is an argument for individual compensation.

Where a wrong has been done and there is financial loss or personal injury, then monetary compensation is considered to be an appropriate way for that loss to be put right so far as is possible.

The total amount of the poll tax collected, adjusted for inflation, and/or interest added would result in quite a large sum.

The Prime Minister in her apology has been careful to state that while the Government of the day did something wrong, "it acted lawfully". This will no doubt be the mantra repeated in every official reference to the Poll Tax in an attempt to admit a wrong but not have to pay for it (or in this case, not pay back the money taken wrongly).

This is very much like taking your car, driving it into the ground and years later saying sorry but paying nothing.

Or taking your land, using it then not giving it back or paying for it.

However, as we all know this not the New Zealand way of political justice.

As the political (electoral) climate changes, inadequate or unfair settlements will re-litigated.

So it is very important that a process that is widely and publicly accepted by the people affect as being fair, adequate and appropriate settle this issue fully and finally.

#### 15. POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Put very baldly, Chinese New Zealanders are well aware that the country is sick and tired of the Treaty settlement process.

They believe that the time spent, compensations paid, lands restored and constitutional accommodations made legislatively and through the courts have not really lifted up their intended beneficiaries by much.

They understand that the last thing New Zealand need is another drawn-out "Poll Tax settlement process" for the Chinese which will bring contempt and opprobrium down on them.

They recognised that no matter what hardships their forebears suffered, they personally are better off than if their forebears did not come to New Zealand and "would not give it up for worlds".

They recognise that great wrongs have been inflicted on peoples throughout history and are being inflicted on living people today.

They believe that their (Confucian-based) Chinese culture has and will sustain them through adversity and offers a formula for survival, adaptation and success.

They believe that the answer to their problems can be found in themselves.

They would rather be accepted as (better-understood) citizens of New Zealand rather than beneficiaries of the State.

#### 16. WHAT ARE OTHER COUNTRIES DOING ABOUT THEIR POLL TAX IMPOSED ON THE CHINESE.

Australia and Canada both imposed a similar tax on their Chinese immigrants.

Australia, which claims to have abandoned the "White Australia" policy to be multi-cultural, is really having to struggling to integrate its indigenous people and admit past wrongs. Meanwhile the Government there is getting good political returns by treating refugees inhumanely. There are no positive lessons to be learnt here.

In Canada there is a strong move to extract an apology and monetary compensation. There the political situation requires an admission of political wrong and an apology to be accompanied by a quantifiable amount in compensation to avoid future open-ended claims. The inability or unwillingness to contemplate monetary compensation has delayed any apology. (At least one major faction of) the Chinese Canadians also want their money back to spend as they please to restore their dignity as equals in Canadian society, regarding drip-fed restorative action programs undertaken at the leisure and whim of the (white majority) Government as paternalistic.

And to hell with any backlash. That is their reality.  
The majority of thinking New Zealanders do not support any moves toward individual compensation.

Steven Young

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