

Speech given by Professor Kuan M Goh

NEW ZEALAND CHINESE ASSOCIATION (INC.)

Chinese New Year Speech at the Parliament House, Wellington, 12 February 2002

The Rt. Hon Helen Clark, Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Hon George Hawkins, Minister for Ethnic Affairs, Ministers of the Crown, Members of Parliament, Members of the New Zealand Chinese community and other ethnic groups, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, Kiaora, Tena Koutou, Tena Koutou, Katoa

Ni How, Nay Hoe, Kong Hee Fat Choy! Greetings!

On behalf of the New Zealand Chinese Association, I would like to thank the Prime Minister and the Minister for Ethnic Affairs for inviting my wife and I and also representatives of the New Zealand Chinese community to attend this Chinese New Year Reception in the Parliament House today.

We are delighted to be here in the Grand Hall of the Parliament House to join in the Chinese New Year celebrations, co-hosted by the Prime Minister and the Minister for Ethnic Affairs.

Traditionally, Chinese New Year is celebrated as a family affair, a time of reunion and thanksgiving. It is celebrated as a Spring Festival when children return home to their parents for the family re-union. I regard today's gathering here in Parliament House as the re-union of one big family.

I would also like to thank the Prime Minister for her acknowledgements of the Poll Tax and the public apology, and the Minister for Ethnic Affairs for his kind words. This is not only an auspicious occasion to celebrate the Chinese New Year but is also a historic occasion.

To mention the Poll Tax is to mention something very close to the hearts of the Chinese in New Zealand and to recognise the Poll Tax is to recognise the injustices of the past.

Some of our critics may say why bring out the past. On the other hand, many people would not agree with the critics. We should not forget the past as the famous Chinese scholar and politician, Yee You Ren once said "History must not be allowed to become ashes".

As some of you may be aware, the Poll Tax was imposed by the New Zealand Government of the day in 1881 on Chinese immigrants entering New Zealand under the Chinese Immigration Act 1881, whereby each Chinese immigrant was required to pay an entry tax of £10 which was raised to £100 in 1896. In those days, the amount of Tax imposed exceeded a year's wage. The Tax was continued for slightly over half a century until 1934, when the payment was waived and the Act repealed in 1944.

The New Zealand Chinese Association was formed in 1937, some 65 years ago. It is a national body currently represented by 12 branches throughout New Zealand.

The Association has always regarded the Poll Tax as an issue of concern. It began conducting research and commissioned publications on the topic more than a decade ago.

Since 1992, the Association discussed the Poll Tax in numerous meetings and conferences including regional consultations of its members and interested parties including descendants of Poll Tax payers. The main objective was to seek a meaningful and positive resolution on the matter with the New Zealand Government.

It is now more than 121 years since the Poll Tax was introduced. I am delighted that the present Prime Minister and the New Zealand Government acted on the matter today.

I would like to congratulate the Prime Minister and the New Zealand Government for having acted so speedily, courageously and compassionately on the matter. It is for the first time for the Chinese in New Zealand when the Prime Minister has the foresight to right the wrongs and to mend the history right. It is also most noteworthy especially this is the Chinese Year of the Horse and the Chinese believe things should be done promptly.

I believe the Prime Minister and her Government by their public apology today are creating a positive and productive way forward in advancing race relations in this country.

We are looking forward to working with the Government in further consultations on the issue.

On behalf of the New Zealand Chinese Association and the Chinese community, I would like to say thank you very much to the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Helen Clark and also the Minister for Ethnic Affairs, the Hon George Hawkins.

On behalf of the Chinese of today and on behalf of the Chinese of yesterday, who made New Zealand their home, I would like to conclude by expressing my heartfelt gratitude to the Prime Minister and the New Zealand Government for today's historic occasion.

I wish you all a very Happy Chinese New Year and all the best for 2002.

Kong Hee Fat Choy!!

Thank You.

Prof Kuan Meng Goh
National President