

# Response to Reconciliation package

Contributed by Steven Young  
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POLL TAX ADVISORY TEAM

RESPONSE TO PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH ON THE  
GOVERNMENT'S

POLL TAX RECONCILIATION PACKAGE

TO BE PRESENTED

11 FEBRUARY 2004

GRAND HALL

PARLIAMENT,

NEW ZEALAND

DRAFT 4.0

Mr Speaker, Prime Minister Helen Clark, Ministers, Distinguished  
Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Agreement on and implementation of the Poll Tax reconciliation  
package by the Government is an historic occasion for the Chinese  
community which has been established in New Zealand for more than 130  
years.

I am honoured to act on behalf of the Poll Tax Advisory Team and the Poll Tax descendants' community to formally accept the Government's reconciliation package and to thank the Prime Minister and the Government for honouring our community by addressing and resolving a long-felt injustice.

The goodwill of this Government towards its long-established Chinese community will echo around the world. It will show that New Zealand is a nation that is not afraid to address its past; that we are a nation that values its ethnic communities, in particular the contributions of the long-established Chinese New Zealanders.

As New Zealanders, we are proud that, of the countries that have imposed similar taxes on Chinese migrants, our country is the first to not only apologise, but also to back up that apology with a package that is meaningful to our community.

The history of the Poll Tax is now quite well known, thanks to Nigel Murphy's research and publications, originally commissioned by the New Zealand Chinese Association in 1992 and published 1996.

Some of the personal histories of those affected by the heavy tax have been collected and presented in the Poll Tax exhibition, originally set up at the National Library and opening tonight in Auckland – and it is hoped – touring to other centres.

The Poll Tax was not just a heavy financial burden on early Chinese New Zealanders. It also acted as a strong deterrent to the migration of Chinese women. (In fact, from 1925 the official policy was that Chinese women be prevented from migrating to New Zealand.) These policies split and distorted the development of families and severely limited the passing of culture from one generation to the next.

These policies contributed to, (but are not the sole cause of) the descendant community effectively losing its heritage language – Cantonese - and with it, its cultural connections and identity.

The injustice of the Poll Tax and other discriminatory legislation has already been recognised by the Government in the Prime Minister's apology in February 2002.

Since then over 1,000 descendants of poll-tax payers around the country have been consulted, and the Poll Tax Advisory Team, drawn from descendants, has been working with the Office of Ethnic Affairs, and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, to develop a reconciliation package based on those consultation results.

On behalf of the Poll Tax Advisory Team I would like to thank all the officers of these departments who from the beginning strived to truly understand the history and culture of our community and then gave generously of their expertise, time and experience to help shape the final package. Without their dedicated effort and support, this package might well not have survived in its present form.

In the beginning some members of our community did not agree that any Government action was required after the apology. For others; however, the apology has stimulated discussion of community identity and a renewed interest in our history. That is already a positive outcome.

It is recognised by the Government and the Poll Tax descendants that this reconciliation package is not repayment of the Poll Tax collected. Nor is it even "settlement" of an historic claim in the ordinary sense. It is however recognised by the Poll Tax Advisory Team as a package that acknowledges the history of Chinese New Zealanders and in particular the legislative discrimination that they were subjected to in the early days.

Through the resources for schools, and the National Library exhibition, New Zealanders of all ethnic backgrounds will learn about this little-known chapter in our history. And through the restoration of historic sites in Lawrence, Central Otago, our tangible history will be preserved for all to see.

The package also acknowledges the seriousness of the cultural loss suffered by poll-tax descendants by providing some financial resources that will support projects to restore in some measure that loss.

The Poll Tax Advisory Team has resolved that the Trust funds will be used for educational and community projects which enhance the culture and identity of the descendant community, and its relationships with the wider New Zealand community through promoting research, education and understanding, in memory of the original Poll Tax payers and their contributions, hardships and sacrifices.

I am sure that the very practical and useful projects that flow from this will return the Government's investment many-fold in goodwill and understanding. This increased understanding will strengthen the fabric of New Zealand's multi-ethnic society, and encourage greater respect for diversity. The package will also lead to stronger Chinese communities, which in turn will lead to an even richer variety of contributions spanning the arts, business and sports.

Yet our potential is not confined to the local scene. In a century in which the well-being of New Zealand is inextricably linked with Asia, the community that Poll Tax was specifically designed to exclude, still here after four or more generations and 20,000 strong, may yet prove to be one of New Zealand's more valuable resources &ndash; planks to build bridges for international trade and cultural exchange.

Prime Minister: with the Poll Tax reconciliation package agreed and in place tonight, the descendant community can now move on to focus its energies even more positively and fruitfully, certain in the knowledge that its members are now welcome in New Zealand as citizens with full measures of rights and responsibilities.

Once again, on behalf of the descendant community, I thank the Government for the reconciliation package, and pledge that we will faithfully apply the funds to the benefit of New Zealand.

For and on behalf of the Poll Tax Advisory  
Team.