

Chinese Voice 23 October 1997 issue

Contributed by Lachlan
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Community Input into Population Conference

Steven Young

Pansy Wong MP is to chair the ethnic section of the Population Conference scheduled in November at Te Papa. Because of the cost (\$750) and the expectation that submissions will be need to be fairly formal, participants are likely to be from Government, the universities and larger organisations with (paid) research and support staff. Smaller community groups and individuals are less likely to have the means to participate effectively, not withstanding the availability of a limited number of sponsored seats. Partly to address their needs, Pansy has recently been holding a number of "Pre-Population Conference Forums" in the main centres.

While the Population Conference itself is expected to address broad issues which impact on the development of a population policy for NZ (demographics; human resources for economic growth; health, education, housing and other infra-structures and finally immigration), Pansy has found from her meetings that the ethnic communities have focused on narrower issues which impact directly on immigrants. These include the English test for migrants, recognition of overseas qualifications and availability of resettlement programmes. Interestingly Pansy found that people from Dunedin, where few migrants settle, were keen to reap the economic benefits of immigration, whereas people from Auckland were keen to disperse migrants to other areas to relieve pressure on local infra-structure.

Apart from the input from her Pre-Conference Forums which she is recording in detail, Pansy is now inviting informal submissions from any interested parties and individuals which she will consolidate into her final Conference paper. She may be contacted, urgently, through her office at Parliament.

In this way, she believes the hopes and fears of the immigrant communities will be presented and considered alongside the statistics and projections from Government departments; the social research of academics and the political and economic assessments of politicians. She also hopes that another outcome of the Conference will be some progress towards defining a national identity and a greater acceptance of a multicultural society as the norm for New Zealand, moving on from the present bicultural perspective.

Pansy warn against expecting too much from the Conference: "It will only provide signposts indicating the direction that NZ should take in developing its population policy."

One should of course also remember that this Population Conference is the direct result of a promise made by Winston Peters of the NZ First Party during the last elections.

Is the English Language Test Racist?

In 1896 the New Zealand government introduced a 100 pound poll or entry tax on all Chinese immigrants, and in 1907 a stringent reading or education test was imposed. These measures were designed to severely restrict and hopefully stop the immigration of Chinese to New Zealand. Although the Chinese had been invited to come to New Zealand in 1865 to stimulate a flagging economy, public clamour by the European residents forced Government to attempt to close the door on them.

What a curious echo of these events we find in modern-day New Zealand. In 1987 the Labour government opened the door to Chinese business immigrants in an attempt to stimulate a flagging economy. Less than ten years later public outcry from the European population forced the Government to close the door again. In 1995 the New Zealand government introduced an English language test, that, if failed, would cost the would-be immigrant

\$20,000.

To many the similarity between the two historical events is disturbing.

The English test is seen by many Asians as racist and specially aimed at them. Not surprisingly the New Zealand government denied and continues to deny any racial bias in the introduction of the test. However Roger Maxwell, the former Minister of Immigration has admitted that the change in language requirement was to control immigration and thus reduce pressure on housing, education and services in Auckland from new immigrants.

At the end of the day whether the English test was intended to exclude Chinese immigrants is irrelevant, Chinese immigration from Hong Kong and Taiwan has basically stopped and New Zealand has suffered a public relations disaster that, economically and diplomatically, could be very damaging.