

Chinese Voice 27 March 1997 issue

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- Pansy Wong MP Maiden speech in Parliament 19 March 1997, Full text
- Dai Qing in Wellington No to damming the Yangtze
- Thoughts on a Satay Stick Asia 2000's Giant Yum Char - Festival of Asia

Pansy Wong's Maiden Speech

NZ Parliament 19 March 1997

Mr. Speaker,

It is with sincerity that I wish you and your deputy and the assistant deputies all the best in your endeavour to maintain order and standard in this first MMP parliament. It can't be easy with the number of inexperienced new MPs, even more difficult because of the experienced ones. This parliament is very special, its composition is more representative than ever before and has the potential to perform up to the expectations of the majority of the public. I would like to thank Sir Michael Hardie Boys for acknowledging the first MP of Asian ethnic origin during his opening speech delivered on behalf of the crown and wish him well. It is with humbleness, great pride and a sense of trepidation that I deliver the maiden speech as the first MP of Asian ethnic origin. It has been over 130 years in coming and the path leading to parliament is paved with tears, blood, hard work and determination. It is the first step taken by New Zealanders of Asian ethnic origin into this House of Representatives and a positive step towards the concept "One Nation, Many People."

Asian New Zealanders do not constitute a single community, we have different languages, culture, religion and values. We share the same aspirations of all New Zealanders in wanting a safe environment, good standard of living, ability to pursue our dreams and a better future for the generations to come. The lack of appreciation of these separate identities has not helped the wider community to understand, and the minority ethnic communities to participate effectively. Today I would like to acknowledge these communities by their ethnic background; they include Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Cambodian, Japanese, Vietnamese, Sri Lankan, Malay, Lao, Thai, Korean, Indonesian, Pakistani, Burmese, Bangladeshi, Nepalese and Tibetan.

Among New Zealanders of Asian origin, Chinese immigrants are the earliest to arrive and account for almost the entire population of New Zealanders of Asian origin up to 1911, except for a small group of Indians.

The first Chinese were invited in by big runholders and influential businessmen of the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce in 1860 to rework the gold fields and to help overcome the shortage of labour. They were not a welcome addition and became victims of the protests and outburst of violence by the European miners. Two main parliamentary acts were passed; the Chinese Immigrants Act 1881 and the Chinese Immigration Amendment Act, 1896. Both imposed a poll tax on new Chinese immigrants, the latter raising the poll tax to 100 pounds. In 1907 the Chinese Immigrants Amendment Act made provisions for Chinese to pass an English language reading test. These served to ensure a Chinese minority in New Zealand for many years ahead. The worst excesses of community hostility was when Lionel Terry got a pistol and shot an old Chinese man Jo Kum Yung outside Haining Street, Wellington in 1905. This overt racial prejudice was underpinned by fear of economic competition, and the desire for racial purity. Chinese managed to survive by the cultural imperatives of hard work, education, thrift and family values. A few examples include Chew Chong who established butter factory in New Plymouth and Choie Sew Hoy, who pioneered a gold dredge which led the world and revitalised the Otago mining industry. Due to both internal and particularly external changes such as the two world wars, slowly and positively, social attitude towards Chinese changed. They were accepted as model citizens after 1950's, law abiding, undemanding, largely middle class, well educated and low profile. A stark contrast to earlier years when they were seen as uneducated, undesirables with low morale. The acceptance has been earned by the Chinese in mixing, facing and sharing the obligations of the wider society. It also came at a price, as through assimilation the Chinese language and culture did not flourish. Only with changes of social attitude with regard to integration, did the second generations of Chinese feel encouraged to explore their Chineseness.

In 1986, after a decade in which there had been around 100,000 net migration outflow from New Zealand, a major review of immigration policy was completed. This review was finally reflected in the 1987 Immigration Act that overturned the traditional emphasis on nationality and culture as criteria for the selection of immigrants. Coupled with increased realisation of the economic importance and geographical reality, New Zealand should be congratulated for being proactive in fostering relationships with Asia. Through increased trade and tourism,

initiatives such as Asia 2000, there is growing awareness of New Zealand in Asia and vice versa. Asians responded to the positive immigration changes of this country. It is estimated that now Asian New Zealanders account for around 5% of total population. Between 1992 and early 1996, the new immigrants of Chinese ethnic origin have contributed well over 1 billion dollars through spending and investment into our economy. They brought more than their money, this wave of immigrants are high achievers with education and skills to match. Most importantly, they brought their children, their most precious investment without able to fully control the outcome. Like my late parents Mr. Hung Shun TSUI and Madam Pui Ching CHUI, they paid the price of enduring a degree of isolation, separation from their relatives and friends for a better future for us, the children. My mother further demonstrated that language was not a barrier for commitment to her new home. She devised a system to cope with names and terms in Chinese. The Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. Jim Bolger is known as the Shepherd in our household to reflect his leadership role and farming background. Rt. Hon. Helen Clark is the lady in red. However it is not generally appreciated how long it takes for immigrants to fully settle in. Ties of family, friendship and business cannot be cut instantly, it is natural to look back for years to the former homeland. After all, Britain is still being regarded as mother land for many European immigrants. The increase in numbers combined with behaviour perceived by New Zealanders to be irritating, have again aroused controversy and racial abuse. Sensational media headlines such as the Asian invasion, polls of anti Asian immigration results and the politically motivated immigration debate during last election have once again caused pain and agony. Yet, this time, it is different, the new immigrants are of a breed that are not passive targets to racial prejudice. They also have access to votes and making their votes count particularly in the MMP political environment. In August 1996, over 3000 Asian and non-Asian turned out to a political meeting in Auckland organised by various Chinese associations in response to the unfair targeting of Asian immigrants. This time it is also different because of the changes of social attitude in the wider community, the increasing acceptance of the fact that New Zealand is a multi-cultural country.

An ideal multi-cultural country is one where social cohesion is achieved because the different groups share the same basic values. In New Zealand, some of these basic values are the right to a fair go, freedom to pursue dreams, compassion and innovation. Multi-culturalism signifies social justice and implementation of policies that enable individuals to maximise their full potential. It also makes good economic sense. With a mere population of 3.6 million people, we cannot afford for individuals not to realise their potential. New Zealanders of Asian origin appreciate and support the aspirations of the Maori people. We understand the importance of having confidence and pride in oneself, in one's ethnic origin. Without that pride and confidence, one's future resembles a sand castle, not withstanding the next tidal wave of racial or other attacks. For a long time, the Chinese, Indians and other ethnic minority groups have not taken an active part in the planning of our nation's future, they have not been vocal in expressing their aspirations for this country. They retreat and confine their aspiration to their individual self and that of their families. It must be confusing to grow up with reminders such as "do not make waves, there will be racial backlash" against the NZ spirit of speaking one's mind. Violent attacks by the cowardice skinheads on the Somalia family in Christchurch recently is visible and the public condemns it. The scars left by non-violent racial prejudice cannot be recognised even by victims themselves. Only keen observers detect the symptoms of self denial of one's rights and responsibilities. This time, it will be different, we are known for innovative and progressive attitude, our anti-nuclear stand, drive for equality of genders and recent economic reforms all lead me to be positive that we can show the way towards the ideal Multi-cultural state. It needs to be a true partnership approach between ethnic minorities and the dominant groups. It needs to be bottom up from every one of us, and top down from parliament.

In this parliament, we must exercise leadership, we need to be courageous to ensure that New Zealand is pursuing policies that will enhance our future generation's opportunities in the world. Our future generations need to be confident and proud of being New Zealanders and enjoy the benefits and make contributions as world citizens. In the forth coming population conference, we have the opportunity to ensure it is comprehensive in its terms of reference and consultation. It can lay a sound platform to formulate future policies relating to social, cultural, environmental and economic infrastructure, international trade, tourism, immigration and migrant settlement schemes. This parliament can lead by example in changing attitude, we should be proactive and genuine in seeking input from all ethnic communities and mindful of their lack of resources in participation. We must be honest, bold and objective in conducting well informed debates on race issues. Individual conduct and behaviour should not be used to discredit the entire ethnic community.

It is a real privilege to be able to serve in this House of Representatives; it was made possible by the new MMP political system. The support from Chinese, Korean and other ethnic communities throughout the country is overwhelming and I am deeply indebted. The positive responses from the wider community, the interest shown by international communities in Asia, Australia, UK and the USA has given me confidence that we will make positive progress. I am deeply indebted to my campaign committees in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland. Hon. Philip Burdon has been a vocal supporter of Asian New Zealanders and has greatly influenced my move into national politics. The National Party showed the foresight to foster a new era in New Zealand politics and I am grateful for that. To my extended family, thank you for shouldering my share of responsibilities towards our parents. Without Sammy, Teck Seng Wong, my husband and friend, this would not be possible.

To all of you, words cannot adequately express my feelings, I shall repay your kindness and support by committing to the vision of "One Nation, Many People, Shared Values."

Pansy's speech was universally well received by the media, quoted at length in many newspaper editorials, and acknowledge to be among the more inspiring of the maiden speeches. Email Pansy through her secretary <YUANT@mmail.poli.govt.nz>

DAI QING: No to damming the Yangtze

Dai Qing, a Chinese journalist, recently spoke to a full audience at the Memorial Theatre, campaigning against a high dam at the Three Gorges on the Yangtze.

The Yangtze, (with the Nile and the Amazon) is one of the three great rivers of the World, and a cradle of Chinese civilisation. This mighty river, cutting across the middle of China, has been the source of food, water, crop irrigation, transport and communications for thousands of years and remains so to this day. There is currently a scheme getting underway to build a high dam at the Three Gorges, a site of great scenic beauty. To its proponents, the project is vital to the future industrial development of China, providing much needed electricity and the promise of flood control. To its opponents, it is a social and environmental disaster requiring the displacement of some 1.5 million people, the flooding of thousands of hectares of land, the destruction of hundreds of historically and environmentally important sites. Worse, they say, the project will soak up a large percentage of the available national development funds for next 25 years but may be useful for only 100 years because of silting. The military recognises its strategic vulnerability in the age of cruise missiles. Opponents of the project point out that alternatives hydro projects can provide most of the benefits at a lower environmental and financial cost. They claim that the Three Gorges dam is a political project, designed to demonstrate Chinese engineering prowess, industrial might, and national resolve, designated by the late Deng Xiaoping as a project of national importance - at a time when the rest of the world is looking at environmental concerns and sustainable development. They also charge that the cost/benefit research and analysis has been seriously skewed by political interference.

Dai Qing is a open-faced, friendly woman, struggling somewhat with the English language, but very obviously passionate in her beliefs. The adopted daughter of a high ranking official, she trained and worked as a missile specialist before becoming a journalist and short story writer. She was imprisoned shortly after the Tiananmen incident during which, she claimed, she worked only to calm passions. Stripped of all rights except her Chinese citizenship, she is now resident in Australia.

Dai Qing's visit and the interest she aroused, particularly among young expatriate Chinese, for a project remote from our everyday concerns, but nevertheless significant on a global scale, (like the visit of Martin Lee, a champion of democracy for Hong Kong post 1997) indicates firstly that New Zealand still exercises significant moral leadership in world affairs and secondly, Chinese in positions of power will still speak out on thorny political issues, at considerable risk to their own personal freedom.

Thoughts on a Satay Stick

The organisers of the Festival of Aisa will be well pleased with Sunday's turnout. A fortunate break in the weather meant that Courtenay Place and environs were full of Asians and Asiaphiles looking for food, but latecomers having difficulty finding enough, such was size of the crowd estimated at four to five thousand. Even a seasoned observer would have been surprised by the number and variety of Asian people there: Pat Booth's worst nightmares of an invasion were momentarily realised in 500 metres of Wellington. Among the dancing and music, most of the usual Asian community groups, and the ethnic restaurants of Wellington's Food Street were represented by a table, stall or tent from which their signature cuisines were pedalled to a hungry crowd. But the greatest impact was of the numbers of Asians in the crowd itself. Some were rather obviously new arrivals, predominantly young, happy, relaxed as one would expect in the weekend, but also purposeful - students in the main who, one could imagine, were just coming to grips with the social side of the New Zealand school system, but coping well enough with the academic - and destined from great things if their brisk parents had anything to do with it! And one could see many young Asians with Kiwi friends - in a group, or as couples - a sure sign indeed of thorough integration. The Asians in the crowd might have been surprised - as I was - by their own large numbers turned out in that length of street and derived from that some strength or perhaps solace in their usual isolation. (The politically aware would realise that they were now here in numbers sufficient to make a difference - although for most on the day, that would have been far from their minds.) Here was walking evidence that even if NZ was not an Asian country, it was a part of Asia and somehow - human osmosis via jumbo jet - Asia had arrived on NZ's front yard. If the adage that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach needed to be translated into the equivalent for Wellington's community, the answer might well be a giant yum char party in Courtenay Place. (Having succeeded with that, Asia 2000 might next consider what is the way to get to a community's mind.)

