

Lambing Flat Remembrance: Righting Wrongs

The worst anti-Chinese riots in Australian history occurred 150 years ago, on the 30th June 1861, on the Burrangong goldfields of Lambing Flat (Young NSW). Anti-Chinese specific immigration laws were first introduced in 1855 by the Colony of Victoria and every colonial government followed with similar legislation of their own. This eventually led on Federation to the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 or the 'White Australia' policy, which was in place until 1973. For nearly 120 years the Chinese were treated in this country as lesser human beings.

Why then have Chinese Australians, who were subjected to discriminatory policies for such a long period, not done anything to right these wrongs? Surely we do not have to wait as long as the first citizens of this country to get an apology and be recognised for the contributions made to the country we call home. It is only now that there are stirrings in the Chinese Australian community to have past wrongs recognised for what they were.

The beginnings date back to the Gold Rush Era, when in order to restrict the number of Chinese entering Australia, Victoria passed an Act to regulate the conveyance of Passengers to Victoria 12 June 1855. South Australia followed in 1857 with an Act to make provision for levying a charge on Chinese arriving in South Australia, while New South Wales enacted the Chinese Immigrant Regulation and Restriction Act of 1861. These Acts applied an entrance or head tax, as well as regulating the number of Chinese passengers a ship was allowed to carry.

These discriminatory practices led to the infamous Immigration Restriction Act 1901, commonly known as the White Australia Policy, which incorporated a dictation test (not necessarily in English) and was aimed at keeping non-whites (mainly Chinese) from entering Australia. The dictation test remained until 1958 and the last vestiges of the 1901 Act were only removed by Gough Whitlam's Labor government in 1973. Little did I know when I arrived in Sydney as a New Zealand citizen in 1964 that the Immigration Restriction Act applied to me and I (unlike white New Zealanders) was required to have an entry visa.

Other countries, such as New Zealand and Canada, followed this Australian precedent of using a head or poll tax as an immigration restriction measure. In 1881, New Zealand adopted the practice with a £10 entry tax later increased to £100 (my father was one of those who had to pay this) and Canada imposed a poll tax on the Chinese in 1885. This tax was repealed by Canada in 1923 and by New Zealand in 1944.

The Chinese in New Zealand, Canada and the United States sought recognition and redress from their governments for these discriminatory policies and have received apologies and reparations. On the 12th February 2002 (Chinese New Year Day) New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark said:

“I wish to announce today that the government has decided to make a formal apology to those Chinese people who paid the poll tax and suffered other discrimination imposed by statute and to their descendants.

With respect to the poll tax we recognise the considerable hardship it imposed and that the cost of it and the impact of other discriminatory immigration practices split families apart.

Today we also express our sorrow and regret that such practices were once considered appropriate. While the governments which passed these laws acted in a manner which was lawful at the time, their actions are seen by us today as unacceptable. We believe this act of reconciliation is required to ensure that full closure can be reached on this chapter in our nation’s history.”

In 2005, the government contributed NZ\$5 million to establish a Chinese Poll Tax Heritage Trust. People who paid the poll tax were not personally compensated.

On the 22 June 2006, the Prime Minister of Canada Stephen Harper officially apologised for the Chinese head tax of the 19th and early 20th centuries, offering a ‘symbolic payment’ of C\$20,000 to surviving payers of the tax and their spouses. An additional \$10 million was added to the \$25 million already put aside by the previous Liberal government to finance cultural community improvement projects and a

‘national recognition’ education program to acknowledge the impact of past immigration restrictions on ethno-cultural communities.

On 17th July 2009 the California legislature approved a bill apologising to Chinese Americans for racist laws dating from the 1852 foreign miners’ tax aimed at Chinese immigrants, to other laws such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act passed by the U.S. Congress. The bill also recognises the contributions that Chinese immigrants made to the state, particularly their work on the Transcontinental Railroad.

Surely, it is past time that this issue be addressed and redressed in Australia. At a recent conference, organised by the Chinese Community Council of Australia, on the theme of *Finding the Chinese Australian Voice*, the seeds have been sown for the Chinese Australian community to take a more proactive approach as stakeholders of their own history, with the passing of the following resolution:

“That this conference resolves to ask the CCCA National Executive to look into the Lambing Flat incident and other discriminatory policies against the Chinese with the possibility of asking the Australian Government for an apology and to acknowledge the contributions of Chinese Australians.”

The Chinese Australian community, which comprises about three percent of Australia’s population, is a diverse group ranging from those whose forebears came to this country in the 1800s to those who have arrived in recent decades. For those whose forebears came to this country in the early years and suffered all sorts of insults and indignities, let those who arrived on these shores in more recent decades appreciate what the community suffered for them to now be equals in a multicultural Australia.

The China of today is not the same China that the early Chinese came from and the Australia of today is also not the one our forebears came to. It is time for Chinese Australians to shake off the vestiges of the White Australia Policy and the mantle of inferiority and play a greater role in the public life of Australia. I would like to think that history is important and that the Chinese at Lambing Flat did not suffer in vain.