

Address by the Prime Minister on the Chinese Head Tax Redress

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Ottawa, Ontario

Notes for an Address by
The Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to formally turn the page on an unfortunate period in Canada's past.

One during which a group of people - who only sought to build a better life - was repeatedly and deliberately singled out for unjust treatment.

I speak, of course, of the head tax that was imposed on Chinese immigrants to this country, as well as the other restrictive measures that followed.

The Canada we know today would not exist were it not for the efforts of the Chinese labourers who began to arrive in the mid-nineteenth century.

Almost exclusively young men, these immigrants made the difficult decision to leave their families behind in order to pursue opportunities in a country halfway around the world they called "gold mountain."

Beginning in 1881, over 15,000 of these Chinese pioneers became involved in the most important nation-building enterprise in Canadian history – the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

From the shores of the St. Lawrence, across the seemingly endless expanses of shield and prairie, climbing the majestic Rockies, and cutting through the rugged terrain of British Columbia,

– This transcontinental link was the ribbon of steel that bound our fledgling country together.

It was an engineering feat –one for which the back-breaking toil of Chinese labourers was largely responsible-

– That was instrumental to the settlement of the West and the subsequent development of the Canadian economy.

The conditions under which these men worked were at best harsh, and at times impossible: tragically, some one thousand Chinese labourers died building the CPR.

But in spite of it all, these Chinese immigrants persevered, and in doing so, helped to ensure the future of Canada.

But from the moment that the railway was completed, Canada turned its back on these men.

Beginning with the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885, a head tax of \$50 was imposed on Chinese newcomers in an attempt to deter immigration.

Not content with the tax's effect, the government subsequently raised the amount to \$100 in 1900, and then to \$500 – the equivalent of two years' wages – in 1903.

This tax remained in place until 1923, when the government amended the Chinese Immigration Act and effectively banned most Chinese immigrants until 1947.

Similar legislation existed in the Dominion of Newfoundland, which also imposed a head tax between 1906 and 1949, when Newfoundland joined Confederation.

The Government of Canada recognizes the stigma and exclusion experienced by the Chinese as a result.

We acknowledge the high cost of the head tax meant many family members were left behind in China, never to be reunited, or that families lived apart and, in some cases, in poverty, for many years.

We also recognize that our failure to truly acknowledge these historical injustices has led many in the community from seeing themselves as fully Canadian.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, on behalf of all Canadians and the Government of Canada, we offer a full apology to Chinese Canadians for the head tax and express our deepest sorrow for the subsequent exclusion of Chinese immigrants.

Gar nar dai doe heem.

This apology is not about liability today: it is about reconciliation with those who endured such hardship, and the broader Chinese-Canadian community,

– One that continues to make such an invaluable contribution to our great country.

And while Canadian courts have ruled that the head tax, and immigration prohibition, were legally authorized, we fully accept the moral responsibility to acknowledge these shameful policies of our past.

For over six decades, these race-based financial measures, aimed solely at the Chinese, were implemented with deliberation by the Canadian state.

This was a grave injustice, and one we are morally obligated to acknowledge.

To give substantial meaning to today's apology, the Government of Canada will offer symbolic payments to living head tax payers and living spouses of deceased payers.

In addition, we will establish funds to help finance community projects aimed at acknowledging the impact of past wartime measures and immigration restrictions on ethno-cultural communities.

No country is perfect. Like all countries, Canada has made mistakes in its past, and we realize that.

Canadians, however, are a good and just people, acting when we've committed wrong.

And even though the head tax – a product of a profoundly different time -- lies far in our past, we feel compelled to right this historic wrong for the simple reason that it is the decent thing to do, a characteristic to be found at the core of the Canadian soul.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, let me assure the House that this government will continually strive to ensure that similar unjust practices are never allowed to happen again.

We have the collective responsibility to build a country based firmly on the notion of equality of opportunity, regardless of one's race or ethnic origin.

Our deep sorrow over the racist actions of our past will nourish our unwavering commitment to build a better future for all Canadians.

Thank you.