

*Written and transcribed by Brad Lee*

Simon Li, the 25-year-old host of a popular Chinese-language call-in radio talk show on Toronto First Radio AM 1540, was given a chance to interview Prime Minister Paul Martin about the upcoming election.

Li used a 10-minute time slot, arranged by a Martin campaign handler late last week, to talk one-on-one with the Prime Minister about Chinese head-tax redress – a major election issue for Chinese Canadians.

The issue has been roiling in Chinese-language media for weeks, gaining more attention after a \$2.5 million deal in principle was announced – just before the election call – by Minister of State for Multiculturalism Raymond Chan and the National Congress of Chinese Canadians, lead by Toronto lawyer Ping Tan.

At issue is the form of an apology and appropriate redress for survivors of the head tax that was imposed on Chinese immigrants from 1885 to 1923, as well as community redress for the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 which replaced the head tax by stopping all further immigration to Canada and disenfranchising those Chinese who were already here. The federal act separated families on both sides of the Pacific Ocean, and set the grounds for further racial discrimination against the Chinese. It was not repealed until 1947.

Opponents have criticized the government for dealing with the NCCC, which accepted the preconditions of “no apology, no compensation” in the proposed settlement. They are also angered by the government selecting only one group to represent all Chinese Canadians.

The Chinese Canadian National Council and partner groups, which registered more than 4,000 head-tax survivors and descendants, have lobbied the government since 1984 for recognition of past injustices and appropriate redress. They were left out of the deal.

Li says callers on his talk show are saying the deal between the Government and NCCC as similar to the sponsorship scandal in Quebec, involving a potential payout to Liberal Party loyalists and the possibility that funds could mushroom.

The following is a transcript of Li’s taped interview with the Prime Minister on Friday afternoon (Dec. 2, 2005) in the B.C. Room at the Fairmont Royal York hotel in Toronto (Li will broadcast the entire interview for the first time Tuesday night (Dec. 6) from 6:20 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. on his show, “Power Politics,” along with translation of Martin’s comments into Cantonese and his own commentary and live call-in):

**Prime Minister Paul Martin:** Dear friends in the Chinese community. I’m Paul Martin and you’re listening to Simon Li’s “Power Politics – Yet Boon Jing King” – on AM 1540 Toronto First Radio.

**Simon Li:** Hello Mr. Prime Minister, welcome to “Yet Boon Jing King Power Politics” on AM 1540.

**Martin:** Well, it’s great to be here.

**Li:** Mr. Prime Minister, do you know that the head-tax issue is galvanizing young voters and people outside the Chinese community now?

**Martin:** I think that the head-tax issue is a terrible, terrible tragedy. It is an incident in Canadian history that must not be forgotten. People suffered. I've met victims of it, and it's incredible what those people went through. These are people who made a tremendous contribution to Canada.

That's why it's so important to acknowledge it, why it's so important to commemorate and it's also why it's so important to educate young Canadians and Canadians for generations to come about what happened, so that kind of thing can never, never happen again.

**Li:** But are you aware that the Liberals' way of handling it is now galvanizing young voters? I have to say that we've got the strong impression through our call-in show that the government's proposed settlement is actually mobilizing the reluctant Chinese population to vote. My callers would like to ask you this question, Mr. Prime Minister: What is so wrong with saying sorry to those who paid the head tax?

**Martin:** What is essentially ... You're dealing with a government policy that has been established for a long time.

It's important to acknowledge how terrible an event this was. And that's what we have done. If you take a look, not only have we put up the original \$2 million but there's more money to come and this was done by Raymond Chan who is a minister in the Canadian Government.

It's important to acknowledge it. We've acknowledged it. It's important to recognize just how tragic this was and we have done that.

But it's also very important to put in place educational materials so that it never happens again and so that Canadians know what has happened.

Now, in terms of what we have done, we met with the widest range of the Chinese Canadian community and what they have said is, "Look, there are differences of opinion; there are in any community on issues such as this," and we recognize that, but we had to deal with it, otherwise we were going to keep on talking about it and talking about it. And I'm going to tell you something, I want us to understand what a terrible thing this was.

**Li:** But what's so wrong in saying, "Sorry"?

**Martin:** We're acknowledging what happened. I mean this whole issue occurred because it is such a terrible tragedy. Yes, we are dealing with government policy that has been established a long time.

But what we have done as a Liberal government is gone further and say we're going to deal with it. We're not going to allow this thing. You know, the Conservatives could have dealt with it 10 years ago. They didn't deal with it. Previous Liberal governments could have dealt with it. They didn't deal with it.

We have dealt with it. And we met with the Chinese Canadian community right across the country in order to come up with a formula that was acceptable to them.

**Li:** Mr. Prime Minister, I've met a 100-year-old man who has paid the head tax. He would like to ask you this question. What is wrong with you giving him back his money?

**Martin:** You know, I also met with a person who was somewhere between 93 and 98, who paid the tax. I met with him in Vancouver.

What he said to me was, "What I want you to use this money for is to educate Canadians. Not just Canadians in the Chinese community, not me, I want you to educate Canadians in the wider community what happened. This is the best thing you can do with your money."

You know something? Look at this country. Look at our great strengths. If we don't know the flaws in our history, how are we ever going to improve. And that's what this man said to me. He really said, "I want you to take the money and I want you, I want you to educate Canadians." That's what we want to do.

**Li:** So in a nutshell, the 100-year-old man that I talked to would not get his money back?

**Martin:** What he is going to get is that Canadians for generations to come are going to know what a terrible thing happened to him. And he's going to know that in fact this country will never do it again, because they will understand that that is just not the way that Canadians should act.

This man, the man that you're talking about, as with Mr. Charlie Quon that I met in Vancouver, will know that in fact his suffering will not go in vain.

**Li:** What do you have to say to my callers who have said that your party has taken the tax payers' money (and given it) to political cronies?

**Martin:** I was the person who put in place the Commission of Inquiry that called in Judge Gomery ...

**Li:** I'm talking about the head-tax issue here and the National Congress (of Chinese Canadians)

**Martin:** Well, the National Congress is in fact we met with the National Congress and they're the ones who said that we should deal with this issue. They're the ones who said this is the way to deal (with it). But we met with other leaders in other cities and right across the country on this issue and they all said this is the way you've got to deal with it. Deal with it in terms of education. Make sure that Canadians ... Let me ask you a question: Do you not want Canadians to be educated about this? Do you not want Canadians to understand what has happened and what a tragedy it was? I do.

**Li:** Let me put it a more direct way. Why Mr. Prime Minister on the eve of a federal election was so much money given to a single organization that sent out squads of volunteers to campaign for Liberal candidates in Toronto's Chinatown in the last election? We don't understand that.

**Martin:** Uh, this money is being given to the wider Chinese community. It's not being given to any single organization and we met with leaders right across the country on this. This is money that we're going to make sure that Canadians know what happened. We're going to make sure that people are educated about this.

This was a terrible thing that happened and I'm not prepared as the prime minister of the country to do what other people have done and that's simply ignore it. I'm going to deal with it. I mean this should have been dealt with ages ago. It should have never been allowed to linger on in this way and I have dealt with it.

**Li:** A follow-up question on your response, Mr. Prime Minister.

We were just talking about the representation of the National Congress, previously, and the government's list of supporting organizations for the proposed settlement consists of over 200 organizations, some of which are not even aware, that's the organizations, (that they) have been included such as CCNC, which was deleted from the list after filing complaints to Raymond Chan, Family Services of Greater Montreal, Amities Chinoises, the Chinese neighbourhood association in Montreal, et cetera, et cetera.

Have (sic) your government done the due diligence in your announcement and could you provide evidence to show all the listed organizations have indeed supported the proposed settlement?

**Martin:** When we dealt with the Chinese community we dealt with as many people as we possibly could. And, obviously, we dealt with the leadership.

Now, did we rely on what they were saying to us? Of course, we did and that's what we should do.

Raymond Chan, and you can speak to him. Raymond Chan has met with as many people as he possibly can. I, myself, have talked to Chinese leaders right across the country.

I can tell you that the vast majority of them said, "Look, deal with this thing. Don't allow it to continue."

The problem that we would have had, what you're recommending, or that some people would recommend, not you, is that we continue to stall and delay and delay. I'm not prepared to do that. I want Canadians to know what happened.

I have huge affection, huge respect for the Chinese Canadian community and I want them to know what happened. I don't want to hide this thing any longer. I want it to be out in public.

**Li:** But how could this be possible. How could, as I said before, your government and Raymond Chan send out the list, saying that your settlement has the support of 200 organizations? Several of them, they said they were not aware. Back to my original question, how could this happen?

**Martin:** The fact is that we did consult with as wide a part of the community as we possibly could ...

**Li:** They don't think so.

**Martin:** Well, I can tell you and you can speak to Raymond Chan, but you can also speak to members of the Chinese community. We spoke to as wide a membership as it was possible to be done.

And I guess what we could have done is to delay, like other governments have done, and never deal with it, but I think we owe the Chinese community too much. I think they've made too big a contribution for us to delay any longer.

**Li:** My last question, Mr. Prime Minister. Some of my callers when we did a call-in show, a number of them believe this is another Liberal sponsorship scandal, but it's in the Chinese community, not in Quebec. Given the money you've given to the National Congress, do you agree?

**Martin:** I've got to say to you that I believe when a government says that we're going to deal with an issue that's important as this, the recognition, acknowledgement of a huge tragedy that happened in Canadian history and the government says it's not going to do what previous governments have done, which is simply to discuss and discuss and discuss, when the government says we're not going to delay on this, that we're going to deal with it, we want Canadians in the widest possible way to know what happened, I think that what we're doing is the right thing.

I'm going to tell you something. The Chinese head tax was a terrible thing and I never want to see it happen again. And I'm not prepared to delay. I'm not prepared to hide it. I'm going to deal with it, and that's what we have done.

**Li:** Mr. Prime Minister, thank you very much for joining us.

**Martin:** Thank you.