

Private Members' Business

To illustrate the context of this debate, I would like to provide a short summary of the history of Canadians of Chinese origin, including the discriminatory measures that caused so much suffering. I would like to give my colleagues a better understanding of the head tax and the Chinese Immigration Act, and of the impact they had on the Chinese community.

Madam Speaker, this particular part of our history is not something I am proud to bring to the attention of my colleagues and Canadians. Nevertheless, we must look at the facts, otherwise we would be remiss in our duty to Chinese Canadians, their ancestors and all Canadians.

Chinese immigrants first arrived in Canada from San Francisco in 1858, to take part in the Fraser River gold rush. The first Chinese community was founded in Barkerville, British Columbia. The Canadian Pacific Railway could not have been built without Chinese immigrants, who laboured under appalling conditions.

As soon as they arrived in Canada, the Chinese were subject to measures that had the effect of restricting their rights. For instance, in 1875 they lost the right to vote in British Columbia. Widespread anti-Chinese agitation led to the head tax, adopted by the Government of Canada in 1885.

The initial tax was \$50 but anti-Chinese pressure became so great that the tax was raised twice, rising to \$500 in 1903, the equivalent of about two years' wages for the average Chinese worker.

Madam Speaker, quite frankly, the purpose of the tax was to stop Chinese immigration. The result was that in 1923, Chinese immigration had ceased, for all practical purposes, except for a few rare exceptions. July 1, 1923, became known as "Humiliation Day".

The impact of these measures on the lives and prosperity of the Chinese-Canadians was disastrous. This was a society bereft of women and children, a society of solitude and social and economic misery as a result of the problems experienced by Chinese workers when they tried to bring their wives and children to this country. According to the Canadian Encyclopaedia, in 1931, out of a total Chinese population of 46,519, only 3,648 were women.

Canadians of Chinese origin paid more than \$23 million in head taxes between 1885 and 1923. Perhaps I

may give some idea of what this meant. According to Peter S. Li, who studied the history of Chinese-Canadians between 1905 and 1914, in 1911 the government collected \$13,800,000 in head taxes, the equivalent of 14 per cent of the defence budget at the time. An impressive amount indeed!

Madam Speaker, today, despite the difficulties in the past, there are nearly 400,000 Chinese Canadians in this country. Through their participation in various trades, their voluntary and community associations, their businesses, their famous Chinese restaurants—Madam Speaker, I have a few in my riding as you do, and we go there every week—their neighbourhoods and their immense culture, Chinese Canadians contribute to the rich mosaic of the Canadian family.

• (1740)

To be a Canadian means to belong to a multicultural family, and we have made this diversity a matter of pride and a matter of sharing. To ensure that racism does not take root as a result of these differences, this diversity is recognized as a fundamental characteristic of our society and a major consideration in the decision-making process of the federal government and its institutions.

As a government, our position is clear. The very existence of racism and racial discrimination is the antithesis of our laws and our ideals. Furthermore, such attitudes are incompatible with the kind of country Canadians want to build for themselves, and must be rooted out for good.

Madam Speaker, the government is giving special consideration to representations made by groups of Chinese Canadians. The situation was not generally known to Canadians until recent years. Nevertheless, we should not be rushed into hasty decisions that might have unforeseen consequences. We must put the situation of Chinese Canadians into the general context of our cultural groups in Canada, a number of which have suffered the cruel ravages of racism.

Madam Speaker, today Canada has become a model as far as human rights are concerned. Unfortunately, some of our ancestors did not have the same social conscience that is now common among Canadian men and women. Some of our ancestors had exaggerated fears about immigrants, and we recognize the fact that these fears produced some very unhealthy situations for Chinese Canadians.