

CITY OF VANCOUVER’S OFFICIAL APOLOGY TO THE CHINESE COMMUNITY



Recognizing Historical Discrimination Against Chinese People in Vancouver

The following apology to the Chinese community was issued by City of Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson on April 22, 2018 during a Special Council Meeting:

“The living legacies of the injustices against Chinese people in Vancouver still resonate with us today. They echo in our city, in our collective histories, and in the stories of our elders. After many years of work by community advocates, the Advisory Group on Historical Discrimination Against Chinese People, and City of Vancouver staff, to bring to light the scope of this systemic discrimination, I rise today to acknowledge and address a dark and difficult period of our past.

For the first half of the City of Vancouver’s history, racial prejudice and discrimination against our Chinese-Canadian residents was commonplace. And yet for those 60 years, rather than standing up against the injustice of racism, many of our elected officials including mayors and councillors used the legal power of the City to enact and expand laws targeting Chinese residents. Through Council motions and through the everyday effects of bylaws and licences and legalized racism, the Chinese community of Vancouver suffered the awful consequences of lawful discrimination. I rise today as the Mayor of Vancouver to recognize and to take responsibility for the suffering and indignity endured because of this historical injustice.

The depth and breadth of the actions for which we apologize today are deep:

- From the first moments of our incorporation as a City, on April 6, 1886, Vancouver took away the legal right for the Chinese community to vote. The minutes of the first Council meeting had the following: “No Chinaman or Indian shall be entitled to vote in any municipal election for the election of a Mayor or Alderman.” Full voting rights, a cornerstone of our democracy, were not granted to Chinese-Canadians in Vancouver until 1949.
- The City of Vancouver lobbied the Federal government to pass racially discriminatory immigration policies, including the Chinese Immigration Act in 1923 which formally excluded Chinese people from immigrating to Canada. For the next 25 years, fewer than 100 Chinese immigrants were legally allowed to enter Canada, splintering families and creating unspeakable suffering within Vancouver’s Chinese community.
- Through its contracts and grants, the City of Vancouver excluded people of Chinese heritage from being employed by the City or by those doing business with the City. No Chinese person was employed by the City of Vancouver until 1952.

- Numerous measures were taken to segregate the areas where Chinese residents were able to live and to earn a livelihood. City bylaws restricted where Chinese people could own and run businesses. Housing covenants were used to prohibit Chinese residents from purchasing property. Although these clauses are no longer legally enforceable, many remain even today on legal titles, a reminder of how racial segregation in housing and business shaped our city’s neighbourhoods and communities.

The elected officials of the City of Vancouver used their role as leaders to sow the seeds of intolerance that emboldened individuals and groups to act upon anti-Asian discrimination. Whether by explicitly encouraging anti-Chinese sentiments, or by silently allowing racial hatred and violence to continue, too many of our predecessors stood by – rather than stood up to – racism.

I rise today to recognize and repudiate how such acts stigmatized and dehumanized the Chinese Canadian community of Vancouver. I rise today to formally apologize to the Chinese community in Vancouver and to all Canadians of Chinese ancestry for the discriminatory legislation directed against Chinese people in Vancouver by its elected officials and civil servants from 1886 to 1949. On this day, on behalf of City Council and the City of Vancouver, I sincerely apologize for these past injustices and their cruel effects on individuals and their families, and commit to ensuring that similar unjust practices are never again allowed to fall on any group or community.

I rise today to acknowledge the darkness and suffering that anti-Chinese policies and legislation caused, and to vow that never again will Mayor and Council stand aside in the face of racism. We will stand up to those who would use racial discrimination to divide us, and we vow each and every day to challenge and combat intolerance, and to be vigilant against the rise of prejudice and discrimination. This is our responsibility in light of our dark history. This we owe today and tomorrow to those who suffered the effects of the legalized discrimination of yesterday. This debt of shame incurred in our past we pay forward, so that no citizen of Vancouver will ever suffer again the indignity of racism and prejudice.

Today, Vancouver is a diverse city with a global reputation for celebrating our cultural differences. Our city’s reputation is not merely symbolic; it lives each day in the deeds of individual citizens and civic employees who demonstrate principles of equity and fairness, who treat their fellow citizens, including our newest arrivals, with respect and acceptance. The City of Vancouver owes much to the Chinese community and to all immigrant communities. Along with our First Nations and Urban Indigenous communities, many

have unfairly had to struggle to overcome racism and discrimination, and through their actions have made our society more just and fair.

The struggle to make Vancouver an inclusive, resilient and vibrant city will continue. We recognize that even during the darkest days of racial discrimination and prejudice, there were those brave enough to stand up against injustice. Through such every day acts of firmness and resolve, our city has become a better place, and will continue to become a better place for all of our citizens.

Let us all rise in defence of the principles of equity, inclusion, and equal access for which we stand today and in all the days to come.

What does an apology mean? Apologizing to a community for past injustices is a reconciliation process. This process allows the community to learn from the mistakes of previous generations and, in doing so, consolidate and embrace our firm beliefs and values of being a just and inclusive community. We recognize attitudes and biases can run deep. Learning from past mistakes is a humble step and reminder of ever-present challenges.

Through the process of reconciliation we consolidate and embrace our firm beliefs and values of being an inclusive community; one that embraces our collective human rights and prepares us to be proactive in preventing discrimination. To ensure that this official apology is not confined to being simply words on paper, the City of Vancouver has adopted actions that would give life and sustenance to this apology; not simply to repair past wrong doings but to prevent injustice from ever occurring again.

On November 1, 2017, City Council approved a set of actions that will move Vancouver forward towards a future of reconciliation. The first, which was delivered today, was to acknowledge past discrimination and offer a formal apology.

The City will also strive to strengthen relations with the Chinese-Canadian community through legacy actions, including: initiating and sustaining a Legacy Working Group to oversee the implementation of this set of actions; education and outreach to all Vancouver residents to ensure the wrongdoings of the past are remembered and used as a basis for new learnings on cultural competency and anti-racism dialogues; conserving, commemorating and enhancing the living heritage and cultural assets of the community, with a specific focus on Chinatown through pursuing a UNESCO designation of World Heritage Site for Chinatown, creating a Chinatown Living Heritage and Cultural Assets Management Plan to support the UNESCO process and supporting a redesign of the Keefer Memorial Square.”