

**Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" Imitation Essay:
Discovering the Truth about Multiculturalism in Canada**

At around the beginning of the 2014th year BCE on the Gregorian calendar, I found myself so intimidated by a large swathe of virtual comments that, though they were not so much directed exactly at me, served to affect a large decision I was to make later on in the week. I was meant to speak at the third in a series of "Consultation Forum: Apology for Historical Wrongs Against Chinese British Columbians" meetings, which I had already quite a lot of apprehension about. My mother, being a Chinese Canadian rights activist (among other things), had persuaded me to sign up as a guest speaker, and, feeling the moral obligation to do so, I had obliged. As a descendant of head tax payers who had immigrated to Canada in the 1870s, and having been witness to much social and political progress (or lack of it) over the years, I had felt that, nearing my maturation into adulthood I should, perhaps, face it full on by taking more social responsibility and political action (though truth be told, I had been much more concerned over environmental issues at the time, though this still remained important). Ever since I was nine years old I had constantly been surrounded by old activists; some rather passive; some aggressive, but all with the greater intentions of creating change. In this way my personal urge to speak at these events was even larger than it might have been if I had not had this background. The meeting itself was a (purposefully) half-hearted attempt on the part of the Liberal government of British Columbia to offer an apology for past wrongs committed by governing parties of the province before them.

It seemed clear to me that wrongs had been committed and that recompense was needed, if only for the peace of mind of those directly affected. The apology should not have been only about the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Acts passed by the Canadian government, but about all the separate anti-Chinese legislation filed by the B.C. government along with these anti-immigration acts. However, as I began to do further research on the meetings – to ready myself for my audience – I began to feel more and more discouraged. I had always believed that my place as a Canadian citizen was to stand up for those who had no voice, and for those whose voices may not be counted. It was then that I realized (though of course I had known this before – it only truly hit home at that point) that perhaps I was one of those voices; one that did not matter.

About a week before the event I was scheduled to speak at, my mother sent me (via the wonders of the internet) some articles concerning the previous sessions. A few activists I had grown up around had asked at the session, which was graced with the presence of B.C.'s Minister of International Trade and Minister Responsible for the Asia Pacific Strategy and Multiculturalism, the Honourable Teresa Wat, for financial compensation detailing \$9 million for Head Tax payers and their descendants. It would be meant to show that the apology was sincere; that the government was willing to give a token showing their candor, and that they were not simply using it as another political ploy (which they were found to have been planning to do so in March of the previous

year – hoping to use apologies to cash in on the "ethnic vote," and provide a quick win at the next election).

This recompense was something that made sense to me – my mother had been part of the 2006 Chinese Head Tax Redress Meetings with the delightful and morally-exemplar Right and Honourable Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and although I knew that every move made by a politician was in fact a political ploy, I could only hope that their ploy might actually help the lives of their citizens (not that said Prime Minister has been actually fulfilling these expectations). A bit of compensation for a group of immigrants through which the Canadian government had collected over \$23 million collectively from – and in 1900s worth currency – on basis of ethnicity, seemed slightly reasonable. On top of this, the British Columbian government had imposed laws restricting them from owning property, seeking employment, having the right to vote, and even marrying a white person – and these issues should have been what the apology was about. However, as I read the comments on the articles, most of them called the seekers – those that arrived in Canada before 1947 – "whiny bitches" and would then – (this happening too many times to count) – demand that they apologize for the wrongs of the entire People's Republic of China (which did not hold the name "The People's Republic of China" when these Chinese left their country).

Though the meetings were meant to give comprehensive consultation on the wording of the apology, press releases were given out only the day before, and only to the Chinese community media outlets. It was not inclusive at all. I found that, as more and more information piled up around me, I began to feel as though this might be simply another political ploy. In any case, as a 17 year old, barely-political, wannabe activist, I had no idea how to deal with anything of the like. There was a system; immovable, unemotional, and there was nothing I could do. What would my words matter? And in any case, the people I wanted to talk to would not be there; they would be tucked behind the safety of their computer screens, waiting for the next reactionary article to pop out so they could deflate it.

I read many more articles, all of them stating how financial compensation would not be given – verbal was enough – and that steps towards education of these issues would be taken. I also read (in comment sections), at least seven times – with slightly different diction and grammatical structure, of course – "I would like the Romans to apologize to what they did to my people, the Christians, and give me a shitload of cash while they do so." This was a rather sarcastic response towards a situation that I had always thought rather serious – it irritated me that these people were trivializing it, something that affected people very seriously. The commenters posted about not letting the growing Chinese population bully the government into doing what they wanted, arguing that everyone had strife; the Irish were treated badly by the British; the Italians were treated badly by almost all of Europe, and that asking for an apology from the people who didn't do it was pointless. So, I wondered, did that mean as well that the "comfort women" forced by the Japanese military in the Second World War into sexual slavery do not deserve the apology they are still fighting for even now, every week outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul, South Korea, even though the Japanese government is a different one? I felt that if one were to take on the position of government they must take on the history as well; consideration and understanding of both the past and the fact that a new government governs the present-day products of

one's governmental ancestors, and most importantly, the actions committed by that now obsolete government. These commenters did not seem to understand this, however, and I did not have the courage to engage in a meaningless battle in which neither side would gain any further grounds in comprehension.

I so very much wanted to become a virtual assailant! – well meaning, of course – someone flowing into that dimension of impersonal, harsh binary; traversing maps and minds; finally leaping out of their screens and slapping them in the face, yelling, "I am a person too! Don't think I am the same as everyone else! Don't think you can trivialize my life! Don't marginalize me as an other!" and continue to explain to them, more rationally of course, the rationale behind my initial words. In the end, they would simply – after getting through their initial shock – call the police and have me arrested on grounds of breaking and entering, and my name would be just another added to the list of initially well-meaning and slightly angered individuals who went rather outside usual limits and blackened the name of the cause they were supporting.

But as all this ran through my head, I realized that, at the same time, I was also trying to separate myself; trying to make the newcomer the other, make them bear the brunt of the blow. I was hurt that I had been grouped in with them, these *Chinese*, from China, who weren't really *Canadian*, like me. I found myself in a perplexing situation. On one hand, I was Canadian, on basis of time spent, history, personality, and culture. On the other, I would never be considered Canadian by these commenters, because I wasn't white. I was simply another one of those "lucky bastards who should be grateful they were allowed into our great country at all," (this was also said many times), and I felt that I had been living an isolated existence; believing there was such a thing as equality and inclusiveness in this multicultural nation. I was so hurt by this, and at the same time, by defending myself (though I did not at all – theoretically speaking, if I had defended myself) I became the same, trying only to show someone else that I wasn't in the same class as a new Chinese immigrant, whose very Chinese existence offended the humble, honest lifestyle of the average, well-meaning Canadian. Canadians don't stir shit up, so if you wanna be a true Canadian, don't you, either, was the greater message I gathered from events (and from others before this, concerning everything from environmental concerns to teachers' rights). Everyone has had suicide and anger issues in their families due to governmental race-related legislation, haven't they? It would be wisest for you to leave it behind you and move on. Do not mention it again and perhaps we will not deign lay our true feelings in the open again, shall we leave it at that?

I told myself that these opinions were not important. They were faceless quips that would not affect my decision to speak, nor my attitude on the matter as a whole. As I sat down to compose my speech, I found I could not even gather my thoughts enough to write – something that had for so long been reliable for me – about these issues that I felt were important, which affected not only me but thousands others (though what has writing ever accomplished?). I wrote and wrote, paragraphs of nonsensical ramblings, tied together with nothing but anger and confusion, and again and again I would slam my hands on my desk, unable to think of anything properly coherent.

From late on a Sunday evening, almost into the morning of the next day, I tried to write. When I found that I could not, I stood up from my rickety white plastic chair, paced around, went downstairs to eat, and listened to music; my usual procrastination

methods. However, once I sat back down to write about I found I was again unable. I finally decided I should go to bed, and I left my speech for another day.

For three days I tried to write – writing three different speeches, three different pleas, and in each case I would end up crying instead (after writing quite a lot, of course), unable to finish. I cried in frustration, anger, and simply sadness. I knew that anything I did; anything I did in this world would never really make a difference, and yet this one topic had managed to withdraw such emotion from me as I sat silently in front of a screen and typed. In the end, I did this all this for a three-minute speech that did not matter, and which I did not end up saying.

My inability to write discouraged me to the point that I spiraled into a chasm in which I felt I did not even want to risk the chance of meeting these people in real life (though I had many times before). I did not want to risk laying out my feelings, anger, and despair that would undoubtedly be laughed at behind my back once I had given my brief, scattered, recounting of a youth's perspective on these old, selfish, personal matters; this cold, unforgiving, divided world.

In the end I did not go. I could not manage to gather my thoughts and I simply told my mother I was too frustrated to write, and I would not have been able to ad-lib, I was far too terrible a public speaker for that. One of the old activists, Sid Chow Tan, came over to catch a ride with my mother et al, and I ended up speaking with him about the other meetings he had attended and the antics surrounding it all.

My mother told me afterwards that the session went well – she came back, surprisingly, in a good mood, I had been expecting bad – and said that there had in fact been quite a few young people, though none of them went up to speak. The speakers were mostly older folks, some of whom spoke in Chinese (with translators), some of whom spoke in multiple dialects of Chinese, asking in English, "And exactly whom are you trying to apologize to? Do you actually *know* the history of immigration here?" There were some First Nation speakers, there were some white speakers, and my mother mentioned that the Honourable Teresa Wat did not seem to like her much, because she mentioned that her privilege of running for public office would not have been available when many of the speakers' families had moved here. She also said she does not believe any of this will make much of a difference, but even so, I should submit my writing – perhaps this essay, in fact, to the organizer of the meetings, who is also writing the report on the matter on behalf of the Liberal government. I do not know whether they will find it particularly pleasing or flattering, however.

In any case, on the day of the event, I lived with such a sense of guilt that I did not want to wake that morning to attend my English class where I was to hand in a rough draft of an essay detailing these events, in the (approximated) style of Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant." And it was later that same day that I was meant to give the speech I had never finished. As the night progressed I felt increasingly guilty about how my lack of community contribution was steadily building up further and further – doubled, perhaps, by this event in particular. As I remained at home, doing nothing but mundane and societally-inconsequential chores and homework, I thought constantly about how elsewhere, my mother and others were speaking, as they always had, with little regard for the negativities of others, and all I had to offer were the worthless byproducts of shame. I was an embodiment of my generation; the epitome of complete, guilty apathy in a world that could really use the opposite of our uncaring, unmotivated, virtual nonsense.