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EDITORIAL

# California's apology for past discrimination: Saying 'sorry' says something

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The state's regret for the way past generations treated Chinese immigrants may help heal hurts that have festered for decades.

July 25, 2009

One hundred and fifty years after California began exploiting Chinese immigrants to lay the foundation for its golden prosperity while shutting them out of its benefits, the state has apologized. The legislation expressing the state's "profound regret" for discriminatory laws is purely symbolic, carrying with it no obligation for reparations akin to the \$20,000 paid by the federal government in 1988 to Japanese and Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II. Which raises a key question: Without atonement, how does one assess the value of contrition? To many, the apology approved this month by the Assembly will seem a hollow gesture -- a maneuver by politicians who have nothing to lose and made on behalf of legislative ancestors who never regretted, much less repented, their bigotry.

California's repentance is one in a spate of generations-late apologies (sans monetary compensation). Last month, the U.S. Senate unanimously passed a resolution apologizing for slavery and segregation. In Australia, the government apologized to aborigines for laws that permitted whites to steal their children during more than 100 years of forced integration. The Catholic Church essentially apologized to science, regretting its persecution of Galileo. And former Prime Minister Tony Blair apologized for England's role in the Irish potato famine, saying the world's richest nation was indifferent while 1 million people starved.

It seems almost absurd for a modern generation to apologize for the behavior of its ancestors. But governments, like churches, are more than a collection of individuals. They are enduring institutions that embody community ideals beyond the brief tenure of their representatives. Blair cannot apologize for another prime minister, but England can apologize for England.

California's treatment of Chinese immigrants was shameful. While they did the dangerous and backbreaking work of blasting through rock, digging tunnels and laying tracks to build the state's railroads, overseers were legally permitted to treat them as beasts of burden and laws barred them from schools and other public facilities.

Discrimination is not just a matter of lost economic opportunity and political marginalization. It damages the emotional relationship between citizens and their nation. If an apology can bind up intangible hurts that have endured for decades, then yes, it's worth something.

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