

**Parliament Hill Panelist:
for the Era 21 Networking Breakfast for Young Canadians**

Dr. Vincent Lam

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Thank you Senator Poy, Carol Reichert, and Robert Yip for inviting me. It's an honor to be here on the occasion of Asian Heritage Month. I grew up in Ottawa, and it's great to be back in Ottawa.

I'm of Asian heritage, as you may have noticed. Now, Ottawa used to be a bit smaller when I was growing up, perhaps a bit more Anglo-Saxon. On our street in Nepean, we were one of two non-white families.

Growing up in Ottawa, there were a few things that used to make me feel like I was getting in touch with my Chinese heritage. One was going out for dim sum. No matter where you're from in the world, there's nothing like deep-fried finger food to make a kid feel like he or she is in touch with their heritage. The other time I felt really 'connected' with my Chinese character was when we went to visit family in Toronto. We would often go there for holidays to see our relatives, and I noticed that in Toronto there were more Chinese people, more Chinese stores and restaurants, and of course my Chinese cousins. We used to spend hours playing Monopoly and Scrabble, which as you know are ancient Chinese games.

At some point in my childhood, I told my cousin how great it was to come to Toronto.

I said, "I just love coming down here to Toronto, and experiencing Chinese culture."

He asked, "What do you mean?"

And I said, "Well, you know, there's more Chinese people here, and your family is like, more Chinese than my family."

He looked at me, and he said, "Oh, that's weird. I always thought you and your family were way more Chinese than we were."

It was not long after that, when we learned term banana. This refers to a person who is yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Both my cousin and I felt so comfortable, and integrated, and felt ... well... so Canadian, that we simply assumed that our Chinese relatives must be more Chinese than we were.

This is one of the great puzzles of living in this multicultural society. I'm fully aware that many previous generations of Asian-descended people, as well as other ethnic minorities, had a much more difficult time that I did in this country. However, in the era and circumstances in which I grew up in Ottawa, being Chinese-Canadian was pretty easy.

We are a young country, an experiment in many ways, and one of our successes is multiculturalism. A great mark of the success of Canadian multiculturalism is this: we are a collection of people with diverse affiliations, and yet, especially for many like me who have grown up here during the last few decades, we are so comfortable with our integration into Canadian society that we view ourselves as a seamless part of the whole.

That's a good thing. I think it's very good. Indeed, all Canadians should and must form one integrated society. However, it raises a tricky question: if we are this comfortable with our Canadian-ness, how are we to engage with the notion of a diverse society? I think we should engage with this idea, because it is part of our identity as a country, and a source of our strength, but how do we do it.

I think there are many answers to this question. I'm going to talk about three ways that I've learned to engage with multiculturalism in my life, because you may find some resonance in your own life.

When I was a teenager, the first way I learned to engage with Canadian multiculturalism was through books. They say that if you want to understand someone else, you must walk a mile in their shoes. The only problem is that it's very hard to get someone else to give you their shoes. In a book, the character gives you not only their shoes, but their pants, their shirt, and all the secrets in their heart. You enter their world, and feel their hopes and fears. After you have read a book, you understand the character and their soul in an intimate way, because reading is the closest you can come to actually living another life.

People speak of national literatures. The Tale of Genji was a novel written in 11th century Japan and set at that time. The early Viking sagas concerned ancient Norsemen. There are writers whom we refer to as Victorian writers, because they wrote in and about Victorian England. In Canada, one of our great privileges is that our national literature spans many countries of the world. Although I was a teenager in Ottawa I discovered that through Canadian books, I could journey the backstreets of Montreal with Mordecai Richler, enter India with Rohinton Mistry, and see through the eyes of a Japanese Canadian with Joy Kogawa.

Literature is many things – it is universal and personal. Meanwhile, the national literature of Canada is a chronicle of the diversity in this country. If meaningful multiculturalism is about each of us understanding and communicating with each other at more than a superficial level, the literature of Canada is a deep part of the conversation.

The second way that I feel I engage multiculturalism is through my professional life.

People often ask me about east and west - how my Asian descent mingles with my Canadian place of birth. Like many of you, I live naturally in that place of crossover between east and west.

But you know, in my day to day life, I am aware of another aspect of multiculturalism in my life. You see, I am a physician who writes. I am a writer who practices medicine, and so I work in both of those cultures.

When I walk into a room as a doctor, when I ask the patient what brought them to me, and what the sequence of events was, I understand that they're telling me a story, and I'm listening for narrative. This often helps me a great deal in diagnosis, and in treatment. When I sit down to write, and I try to work through a difficult passage of text, it is the same persistence and systematic problem-solving, which I use in medicine, that keeps me going in my writing.

You see, my knowledge of the culture of literature, makes me a better doctor, and my knowledge of the medical cultural, makes me a better writer.

I think it may be, that because I am a multicultural person, as I think everyone in this country is, that my mind is predisposed to allowing my two fields of work – medicine and writing to strengthen each other. I think all of

us as Canadians are predisposed to this kind of flexible thinking, and I believe that the ability to think creatively and originally is the greatest possible asset that we in Canada can make in a competitive global marketplace.

Our multicultural society predisposes us to do things in new and original ways.

The third way that I have found to engage with multiculturalism is through something I am going to ask you to do. This is the most crucial thing I'm going to say today, and it refers to something that each of you can do and must do. To have a voice in this society, I vote. Many of you in this room will soon be old enough to vote, and you must exercise your essential democratic right. You must vote.

What does voting have to do with multiculturalism? Well, look— if each member of society agreed perfectly upon how the country should run, we would not need elections. We could do away with the whole messy and expensive machinery of democracy. But that's not the case. People have a variety of ideas, and democracy exists to gather those diverse views and put them to work. A multicultural society, with its inherently even greater diversity of opinions must have those opinions expressed through many means, including at the ballot box.

The voter turnout rate in the 2008 federal election was 59.1 percent, the lowest turnout ever recorded for a national election in Canada. I am frightened by this. If the experiment of Canada is to exist and prosper, democracy cannot be forgotten. Some people will tell you that it doesn't make a difference, that politicians are all the same, or that nothing ever changes. Don't listen to them. Some politicians will tell you 'don't worry about it, you don't need to inform yourself, we'll take care of things. Be wary of such politicians. All of those are appeals to political apathy, and the greatest threat to Canadian democracy in this day and age, is precisely that political apathy.

You will soon be adults. You will soon be able to exercise your democratic rights. I'll tell you now, that if you want to live in a healthy, vibrant, multicultural society that not only tolerates diversity but engages it, you must consider the issues, form an opinion, and vote. This is a way that your cultural identity can engage that of your country.

Engage, read, work creatively, and vote. I am going to leave you with a quote.

If Canada is to survive, it can only survive in mutual respect and in love for one another. Trudeau 1976

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