

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Global Perspectives on Personhood: Rights and Responsibilities

University of Calgary

October 14, 1999

Dr. Eriksen, Chancellor Perraton, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to be here this evening, bringing you greetings from the Senate of Canada, as well as being your guest emcee, and to participate in some of the events of the next few days celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the Persons Case, which is of immense importance to women in this country.

It is doubly exciting to be in Calgary, since it is one of the few major Canadian cities I have not had the opportunity to visit since I was appointed to the Senate last year.

Canada has been a place of great change throughout the 20th century. The victory of the Famous Five represents an important milestone for this country. Seventy years later, their struggle for equality remains a powerful symbol and reminder of the importance of striving for what you believe in, even in the face of widespread popular opposition.

In the fight for equality, feminism has, until recent years, been defined as a white middle-class struggle. Non-white women in the rest of the world were left behind, suffering from discrimination based on their race, ethnicity as well as gender. This still applies in our society today. There is so much that still need to be done. Realistically, I know we still have a long way to go to achieve equality in the workplace and in the home.

As a Chinese Canadian woman, I feel it is important for me to participate in the efforts, both as a women and a member of an ethnic minority, to achieve equality in our society. We need to greet the hurdles with the same determination as the Famous Five who appealed to the open-mindedness of the English Lords and overturned the unanimous decision of the Supreme Court of Canada that denied women an equal footing in 1929.

Up until 1929, British Common Law defined that women were persons only in the matter of pain and penalties, but not in the matter of rights and privileges. The Famous Five appealed to the British Privy Council and achieved recognition that the term *persons* in Section 24 of the British North American Act included member of the male and female sex. And thereby, Canadian women could henceforth participate in all aspects of public life, including being appointed to the Senate and federal courts. Similarly, today, we need to recognize that to be a *Canadian* includes all those who choose to make this country their home. How we define ourselves as a nation must come to encompass much more than our English and French heritage. What makes Canada unique is that regardless of our ethnic origins, we are all Canadians, as defined by the federal government's legislation on multiculturalism.

We are extremely fortunate to have this rich, diverse, multicultural heritage. Sadly enough, we still find people in this country for whom new voices and different cultural traditions represent a threat rather than an opportunity. These prejudices aren't much different than those faced by the Famous Five during the first part of this century.

We need to work hard against prejudices against women and minorities, and toward a definition of Canada that includes all Canadians. Our national institutions need to reflect, to the highest levels, that everyone has the opportunity to participate on an equal footing, regardless of their ethnicity or sex.

I have often been asked whether I'm a feminist. Yes I am. Feminism to me means equality of the sexes. My late mother went to a fortune teller in her latter years and was told that if she had lived her life with kindness and generosity towards others, she would come back in her next life as a man. She was not amused. In my case, I don't want to be a man either, I just want to be equal to a man.

In the matter of ethnicity, no one would ever ask me if I wish I were white, Anglo-Saxon. Every one who's ever met me knows I'm proud of my heritage and very comfortable being who I am. I just expect to be treated as an equal. Dr. Eriksen just mentioned the inequality in Zimbabwe between men and women. That situation does not exist in Canada. However, equality to me means equal opportunity, not just equal pay for equal work. Most women today don't have access to equal opportunity.

As women, we do realise that equality does not mean equal in rights only. We do expect to accept an equal amount of responsibility to society. At the same time, we expect men to take an equal amount of responsibility in the home. As a member of the Senate, I am privileged and honoured to have a voice in making positive changes that will bring equality to more Canadians than ever before.

I look forward to hearing our speakers this evening.