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## DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL

**Inquiry–Debate Adjourned**

**Speech by:**

**The Honourable Vivienne Poy**

**Thursday, June 3, 1999**

## THE SENATE

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### DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL

INQUIRY—DEBATE ADJOURNED

**Hon. Vivienne Poy** rose pursuant to notice of May 31, 1999:

That she will call the attention of the Senate to the Dragon Boat Festival.

She said: Honourable senators, June is the time for the Dragon Boat Festival, which is one of the three most important festivals in Chinese culture. The festival, also known as the Poet's Festival, is called *Duan Wu Jie* in Chinese. It is celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, the timing of which is closely linked to the summer solstice.

In the fourth century B.C., near the close of the warring states period in China, lived a poet-statesman named Qu Yuan, a member of the Royal House of Chu and minister of Huai, King of the State of Chu. Qu frowned on the corruption of the court and proposed effective domestic political reforms, a legal system, and a civil service to hire only people of great competence and integrity. He was opposed by other advisors to the king, as well as by the queen consort. His advice to King Huai to make an alliance with the State of Qi against the State of Qin was ignored. Qu was banished and wandered around the country writing many odes and poems showing his concern for his country, and he gained great respect from the people.

In the year 278 B.C., Qin troops defeated the State of Chu and absorbed it. Not wanting to see his country vanquished by the enemy, Qu Yuan, the age of 62, held a rock in both arms and drowned himself in the Miluo River, present-day Changsha.

When the news of his death came, the people rushed to the scene, rowing boats in the river in an attempt to find his remains, which had drifted downstream and were never recovered. According to legend, this happened on the fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese lunar calendar. Qu Yuan's fame spread across the land, and every year the people mourned his death by rowing boats in the river and the sea, throwing in bamboo leaves filled with glutinous rice symbolically to prevent the sea creatures from mutilating Qu's body.

There is so much respect for Qu Yuan in China that in 1957 he was one of the four cultural giants the World Peace Council called on the people of the world to commemorate.

The painting of boats to look like dragons began in the late neolithic period in China. A tribe called Raiyue that lived in

ancient Wu and Yue, present day Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, offered sacrifices to their totem, the dragon. The men cut their hair short and tattooed their bodies with dragon designs, for they considered themselves as scions of the dragon. They also pointed dragon designs on their boats and tools and threw rice wrapped in reed leaves into the water as an offering to the dragon on the fifth day of the fifth month.

Today's Dragon Boat Festival has its origins in both the tradition of commemorating the people's poet, Qu Yuan, and in honouring the dragon. Over the centuries, the people of China celebrated the event annually by holding a dragon boat race, imitating the day the people took to their boats to try to retrieve Qu Yuan's body. The boats were decorated with dragon heads at the bows.

The culinary traditions of the festival still reflect the glutinous rice wrappings that people threw in the water. At this time of year, steamed glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo leaves, sometimes stuffed with pork or red beans, is consumed by Chinese all over the world.

This year, the Dragon Boat Festival falls on June 18 in the Gregorian calendar. Over the past 10 years, more and more Canadian cities are hosting their own dragon boat races. Most of the races occur in June and July, though some cities celebrate as late as September.

This celebration draws Canadians from all walks of life and has become a mainstream Canadian festival in Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Regina, Montreal, and Halifax. In Ontario, races are held in Ottawa, Toronto, Guelph, Pickering, Hamilton, Waterloo, Woodstock, London, and Stratford.

Internationally, they are held all over Asia and Europe, as well as in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

In Toronto, the dragon boat races are now in their eleventh year. Last year, the races drew over 100,000 people. This year, the celebration will include more than 30 multicultural performances, and 85 races with 160 teams participating.

Honourable senators, the Dragon Boat Festival is a wonderful opportunity for us to celebrate our multicultural heritage in Canada. I hope that many of you will have the opportunity to participate in the festivities in your respective parts of the country.

On motion of Senator Prud'homme, debate adjourned.