

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

United Way

May 4, 1999

Friends:

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to address a group of distinguished United Way women tonight. On a personal level, this evening is a unique opportunity for me to meet and exchange ideas with other women who share a common belief in the importance of contributing to one's community. As a Parliamentarian, this is also an excellent opportunity for me to give you some information on the state of voluntarism and philanthropy in Canadian society, and in turn, to learn from you what will be useful in my capacity as a Senator. There is no need to impress upon you the importance of giving, but I do hope that I can inspire you to encourage other women you know to make a similar commitment to their communities.

Before I go into the state of affairs in voluntarism and philanthropy in Canada, I would like to speak on my own experience in this regard. The latest information suggests that those who participate in these aspects of community work in Canada had specific experiences in their youth and in their families with voluntarism and philanthropy. This is very true of my own experience growing up in Hong Kong.

I come from a family that's been known for generosity for generations, not only in philanthropy, but also by helping individuals and organisations through time and effort. Going back in time in Hong Kong, home to my family for over a hundred years, there were few public charitable foundations until recent years. It was up to private individuals to help those in need and to give worthy students assistance because there were no publicly funded scholarships.

It is a Chinese cultural tradition to help not only those within your immediate family, but also your extended family as well as those who originate from the same geographical region in China. This cultural tradition has been important to the survival and support of Chinese overseas for generations, eg. Consolidated Chinese Benevolence Association, Surname Associations, etc. which are still going strong all over the world.

My husband and I just returned from Victoria and Vancouver a few days ago where we received a special welcome from members of the Chinese Canadian community who were from our ancestral and neighbouring villages in China. The same happened in Winnipeg about a month ago. When I was appointed to the Senate, and when my husband received the Order of Canada, our surname associations put advertisements in the Chinese papers to congratulate us. This is normal in Chinese cultural tradition.

Social ties in Canadian society bear little resemblance to traditional China, except within the Chinese community. The nuclear family is the cornerstone of Canada's social fabric and notions of responsibility toward extended family members and those from our hometowns are quite alien to most Canadians. For decades our governments have built up a social safety net that was meant to protect people in need. Ironically, the creation of social benefits has led some people to believe that there is no need to contribute personally to society. As for the ethnic Chinese in this country, to look after only their own is no longer sufficient or valid. We are a multi-cultural society and the Chinese tradition should be extended to include everyone in Canada.

Cuts in recent years by the different levels of government have eroded social benefits. Unlike the Chinese of older generations, there is no extended family to take care of people in need and many are falling through the cracks. The spirit of giving that I learned in my family from an early age is just as valid today in Canada as it was a hundred years ago in Hong Kong. My own understanding of giving is not just of money, but of time and effort as well. A truly generous person is one who will give of himself or herself, in money or in kind. Giving in Canadian society today mean that our contribution will help those we don't necessarily know. It could be anyone in our community or people in other countries around the world. The important thing is to make a contribution to something you believe in.

So what is the state of philanthropy and voluntarism in Canada today? Last year, Statistics Canada released its survey "Giving, Volunteering and Participating". The government and charitable organisations wanted to know more about how Canadians support one another and their communities. Until this survey, there was a real scarcity of information on how Canadians participate in the non-profit realm.

The survey showed that the overwhelming majority of Canadians, 88 percent in total, make charitable donations every year. Direct donations from individuals in 1997 amounted to almost \$4.5 billion. We should be proud to know that women are more likely to be donors than men – 81 percent of women as opposed to 75 percent of men. University graduates led with the highest percentage of donors at around 90 percent. Fewer donors gave money to charities in 1997, but the money taken is increased by about six percent over 1996. People who make big donations are continuing to do so, but there are fewer Canadians donating than in past years.

My concept of giving has little to do with how much a person has. The results of the survey on volunteering and philanthropy prove that Canadians' generosity has little to do with personal wealth. Households with yearly incomes of less than \$20,000 give three times as much of their income to charities as families bringing home more than \$80,000 per year. Although donors with higher incomes tend to make larger donations, they contribute a smaller percentage of their pre-tax household income. Also surprising is the fact that businesses give much less to charity than is widely perceived. Less than one percent of their profits go to charity, and they contribute only about one-tenth the sum donated by individuals.

The study showed that individual Canadians play a critical role in philanthropy. Please note that an additional \$8 billion would go to charities each year if better-off Canadians gave at the same rate as low income Canadians. Affluent Canadians are capable of giving much more than they do. Then we must ask, are we all contributing our share to society?

We note that large donations are very important because approximately 86 percent of all money donated came from about one-third of the donors. Similarly, one-third of all volunteers accounted for 81 percent of all volunteer hours. That means that a core group of donors and volunteers is responsible for a disproportionate amount of contributions – be it in the form of money, time or effort.

What motivates people to become involved in their communities? When it comes to philanthropy, most donors are motivated by their compassion towards people in need, even though some do it for public recognition. Most are motivated to help others because they believe in or

have been personally affected by the cause they support. Many of us feel that we owe something to our society. In many cultures, including the Chinese, it is believed that it's more blessed to give than to receive.

One thing my father used to say will always stay in my mind. He said, "you can only eat so much or wear so many clothes. One must share one's good fortune." This may not make much sense in English, but it does in Chinese. My father was an outstanding member of Hong Kong society. He was not only a very successful businessman, he was known to stand up for the people of Hong Kong. When he passed away in 1983, he was written up as the most respected businessman in Asia and people from different socio-economic groups in society, including cab drivers and factory workers, lamented the passing of a very good man – a man of the people.

Why was that so? It was not because of his business success, but rather charity, in the real English meaning of the word, love and compassion for others. He was the type of person who devoted his life making the lives of others better. He would keep in his pocket letters written to him from students who needed financial help for higher education. By doing this, he would not forget to check into their academic qualifications and family backgrounds. He supported many students during his lifetime, both in Hong Kong and abroad. In those days, there were no government scholarships or grants for students. He would help workers to get better training in order to better their lives. As an Unofficial member of the government in Hong Kong (Unofficial meant he was not a bureaucrat in the colonial government), he would fight for better housing and better health facilities for refugees who flooded into Hong Kong during the turbulence in the Communist takeover in China from the end of the Second World War to the early 1950s. I can go on and on with the many positive things he did for the society he lived in. I have learnt a great deal from him. He taught by setting a good example.

Tonight, I'd like to share with you some of my own thoughts on the importance of philanthropy and voluntarism. I speak as a woman and as someone who strongly believes in the importance of giving to one's community. An interesting thing that came out of the Statistics Canada survey was the connection between early life experiences and volunteering that I made reference to earlier. The volunteer rate was substantially higher among people with specific life experiences during their youth: 51 percent for those who were active in student government; 45 percent for people who

were active in religious organisations; 43 percent for those whose parents were volunteers; 40 percent for those who did some kind of volunteer work. This highlights the need to pass the spirit of giving to one's community on to one's children. I am doing this, and I believe we are already seeing results in our sons. Women today are as important as before in care-giving to their families, and they have a major role to play in shaping and guiding future generations.

Now I would like to speak about the role of women in philanthropy in our society. It is still the case that most of the prominent philanthropists we hear of in the press are men. Maybe this is because men were traditionally the bread-winners, the heads of large corporations who could afford to donate large sums of money to charitable causes. Even when the names of women are mentioned in association with charitable donations, it is often because men contribute in their wives' names. Many women are still more likely to get involved in charitable causes their husbands are interested in. Too few are active in supporting organisations of their own choice.

Women have been fighting for equality with men since the last century. We, in the Western world, have come a long way from the time when having little education was considered virtuous, and the only place for women was in the home. Not having a husband was considered a curse for a woman, and she was referred to as an "old maid". Federally, women were granted the right to vote less than a hundred years ago in 1918. The first woman to become a Member of Parliament was elected in 1921. In 1929, women were declared "persons" by the British Privy Council, and therefore eligible to be appointed to the Senate. The first woman was appointed Senator the following year. However, since 1929, only 55 women have been appointed to the Senate as compared to 371 men. But that's another story.

We are, today, in a much better position than our sisters in the past. We do, if we want to, have a great amount of control over our lives and our bodies. I admit that there is still a long way to go in having absolute equality. Occasionally, I hear women complain that life is unfair, and surprisingly, these complaints are often from women who choose to stay at home after their children are grown, or just want to have a leisurely life. Unfortunately, they would like to have success and recognition in society without having to work for it.

Now, what I would like to point out is that if we want equality, we not only have to work for it to prove ourselves worthy, (I know men don't have to do that), we women must be willing to accept responsibility as well.

In the realm of philanthropy, many women still believe it's the domain of men. Not so. Ladies, if we can work like men, we can also give like them. To give to causes of our choice is to control our own destinies.

Today, many women are financially independent and have successful careers in domains that were once only open to men. Therefore we need to take the lead in contributing to causes which are close to our heart. Women who don't work outside the home are often in the position to give and no longer need to defer to their husbands. In taking a leadership role in philanthropy, women will have a profound impact in shaping society and in upholding our own values. Many of our donations will no doubt strengthen and support women, be it in education, social services or health.

Men have traditionally donated not only in their own names, but in the name of their wives and families. Is there any reason why women can't do the same? I do. I donate in the name of my husband, my parents and my family. You can too. Together, ladies, we'll change the face of philanthropy.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this evening.