

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

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The 1999 Community Seminar

April 26, 1999

Friends and Scholars:

I am delighted to have the opportunity to open today's seminar. I was very pleased when Dr. Coward invited me to participate in this important discussion on multiculturalism. As a Canadian of Chinese descent, opening this seminar in Victoria has a special significance for me. Vancouver Island is the place where the Chinese first arrived in 1788 and settled in what was to become Canada. As you all know, Victoria is home to Canada's first Chinatown, established in 1858.

Canada is a country built by immigrants from the world over. The only indigenous peoples are the people of the First Nations and the Inuit. Then the French and the British colonized this country. The seeds of multiculturalism are to be found in Canada's dual linguistic heritage. As Canada grew and added new cultural groups to its population, multiculturalism became integral to being Canadian. Today, over forty percent of us have ethnic origins that are neither British nor French. The elimination of discriminatory immigration policies in the late 1960s paved the way for increasing numbers of immigrants from different parts of the world.

Former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's adoption of a policy of multiculturalism in 1971 institutionalised the idea that to be Canadian is to share a proud heritage of diverse cultural backgrounds. In 1988, both Houses of Parliament unanimously passed the Canadian Multiculturalism Act and we became the first country in the world to legislate specific goals for cultural harmony. The goals have been to enhance inclusiveness by bringing Canadians closer together in order to strengthen diversity and enhance equal opportunity and encourage mutual respect.

Being a country of diverse ethnic groups has not been without its growing pains. Increased numbers of Canadians of visible minorities and

policies aimed at embracing new cultures has not always translated into acceptance. Governments cannot legislate changes in the way people think. Despite the general tolerance of most Canadians, there are often problems with the attitudes of some among us. So it is important to look beyond the numbers and examine the true extent of our multicultural identity.

Multiculturalism varies in different parts of the country. Most new immigrants to Canada settle in large urban centres. Visible minorities - seven out of ten in fact - live predominantly in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal. Smaller cities are home to relatively few of Canada's recent immigrants. St. John's, for example, has a non-white population of only one and half percent. Victoria stands somewhat below the national average of 11 percent visible minorities with a little less than eight percent at the time of the 1991 census. So the question of multiculturalism varies very much according to where you live in Canada. What is commonplace in Vancouver is not likely to be the same in Moosejaw.

We have come a long way since the establishment of the first anti-Chinese society in 1873 in Victoria, the anti-Asian riots against the Chinese and the Japanese in Vancouver in 1907, and the formation of the Asiatic Exclusion League in Vancouver in 1921. Since the end of the Second World War, the provincial as well as the federal governments have gradually obliterated institutional discrimination in their legislation, thereby making it possible for Canada to be a multicultural country.

Multiculturalism is really the co-existence of different cultures in one society. It entails the acceptance of minority cultural values and traditions by society at large, and the adoption of the mainstream cultures by the new Canadians. Multiculturalism is not only acceptance, but also the celebration of our differences.

The seminars of the next two days will take a focused view of different aspects of multiculturalism in the Victoria area. From the presentation of case studies by Dr. Jo-Anne Lee (Women's Studies), Dr. Joseph Kess (Linguistics), Dr. Michael Bodden (Pacific and Asian Studies) and Dr. Heather Botting (Anthropology), we will learn about the problems encountered and participate in the discussion on how these problems can be solved. These seminars provide a positive and unique opportunity to bring academics and community representatives together.

Is multiculturalism possible? Yes it is, and I am deeply committed to the preservation and evolution of Canada as a multicultural society. That is what makes us distinct. Friends, together we will ensure that our diversity strengthens us as a nation. Thank you for inviting me today to open your 1999 Community Seminar.