



Debates of the Senate

1st SESSION

•

36th PARLIAMENT

•

VOLUME 137

•

NUMBER 111

CHINESE NEW YEAR

Statement by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Tuesday, February 16, 1999

THE SENATE

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SENATORS' STATEMENTS

CHINESE NEW YEAR

Hon. Vivienne Poy: Honourable senators, today is Chinese New Year, the most important festival in the Chinese calendar. It is the time when family and friends gather together and share food, pay respects to their ancestors and await the beginning of spring with new hope.

The tradition of families gathering together for New Year's Eve has its origin in an ancient legend about a beast called "nian." Once a year, the beast came from the sea devouring people and their animals. Families stayed together in their homes on New Year's Eve, feasting, drinking and praying that the beast would not get them. The next morning, they emerged from their homes congratulating each other on having survived the night with the words "gong hey." Because of the connection, the Chinese word for beast, "nian," has come to mean "year."

New Year is celebrated according to the Chinese lunar calendar. The traditional Chinese year has 354 days and 12 lunar months of 29 or 30 days each. Every two or three years, a 13th month is added to make the months correspond with the movements of the earth and the sun. Chinese New Year falls on a different day each year in relation to the Gregorian calendar, sometime between January 21 and February 19. Each year in the

lunar calendar is named after one of the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. Today, the Year of the Rabbit begins.

The Chinese New Year festival and the succeeding days are a time for celebration. School children have a 10-day holiday, and university students have their spring break for up to six weeks. Exhibitions, flower fairs, lion dances, firecrackers and parades usher in the new year. Children and unmarried friends are given "lai see" by those who are married. Those little red envelopes have money inside for good fortune.

Many traditional Chinese New Year foods are chosen because their names are phonetically close to good luck phrases. Eating these foods bestows their wishes on those who consume them. Dried oysters sound like "good business"; lotus seeds like "many sons"; while whole fish with heads and tails are cooked, symbolizing abundance.

Traditionally, Chinese decorate their homes and businesses with potted flowers as an important symbol of new growth and prosperity. As in Western homes with Christmas trees, trees of peach or cherry blossoms are cut and sold in New Year markets to be put in large vases. If they come into bloom on New Year's Day, it means good fortune for the coming year. Peonies and narcissus are also highly favoured flowers at this time of year. In preparation for the New Year, families cook for weeks. Steamed and fried foods, as well as platters of tangerines, oranges and dried fruit, are served to guests.
