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ASIAN HERITAGE

**Motion to Declare May as Month
of Recognition—Debate Adjourned**

Speech by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Tuesday, May 29, 2001

THE SENATE

Tuesday, May 29, 2001

ASIAN HERITAGE

MOTION TO DECLARE MAY AS MONTH OF RECOGNITION—
DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Vivienne Poy, pursuant to notice of May 15, 2001,
moved:

That May be recognized as Asian Heritage Month, given the important contributions of Asian Canadians to the settlement, growth and development of Canada, the diversity of the Asian community, and its present significance to this country.

She said: Honourable senators, on May 5, 2001, I attended a public forum in Calgary to kick off Asian Heritage Month. This year, for the first time, Calgary joined with Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Edmonton and Halifax to acknowledge and celebrate the important contributions of Asian Canadians. Throughout Canada there were screenings, readings, visual arts exhibits, theatre presentations and festivals in which Canadians of both Asian and non-Asian descent participated in community celebrations.

While various cities in Canada hold events to celebrate Asian heritage, British Columbia is the only province to have officially declared May as Asian Heritage Month. It first declared it in 1996 and has since proclaimed it on an annual basis.

In marking the fourth anniversary of the event in the year 2000, Premier Dosanjh and the Minister of Multiculturalism and Immigration, Sue Hammell, noted the importance of Asians in British Columbia both historically and currently.

• (1750)

Hammell said:

The Asian-Canadian community makes enormous contributions to our province. The community has been here for more than a century, and its pioneers have left an impressive legacy. Succeeding generations continue to play important roles in the economic, social, cultural and political life of British Columbia.

The official provincial designation of Asian Heritage Month in British Columbia has helped to build grassroots support for the month-long celebrations.

In the United States, official acknowledgement of Asian-American contributions dates back more than two decades to 1979 when President Jimmy Carter designated May 4 to 10 as Asian-Pacific American Heritage Week. Later, President George Bush extended the week-long celebration to a month. Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month was proclaimed in October 1992. As a result of this official acknowledgement by

the White House, events have been organized across the country during the month of May.

Asian contributions in the U.S. and Canada share some similarities. Asian pioneers, in particular the Chinese, played a major role in the construction of the railways in both countries, which helped to unite both nations physically and symbolically. Between 1881 and 1885, many gave their lives for what Pierre Berton described as “the National Dream.” It is not hyperbole to state that without the CPR, it is likely that Canada would not exist in its present form since it was the railway that joined the west to the east, allowing for structural and political union.

Asians settled in Canada over a century ago. Invariably, like other immigrants, they came in search of a better life. Despite being initially exploited as cheap labour, communities flourished as businesses grew. Like the French and English pioneers, Asians helped to build this country with their own hands, working in Canada’s natural resource industries.

The Japanese were consummate fishermen. The Chinese were involved in mining, forestry and the cannery industry. The South Asians initially worked in the lumberyards with a few opening their own mills. However, their industriousness was not always appreciated in the past and, as we all know, there were many attempts to curtail Asian immigration, as well as to limit the rights and freedoms of Asian Canadians.

When the United States passed an act to designate Asian-Pacific American Heritage month in 1992, nearly 8 million people in the United States could trace their roots to the Asia-Pacific region out of a total population of 250 million. In comparison, as of 1996, nearly 2 million Canadians, or almost 7 per cent of the population, identified themselves as being of Asian origin.

In addition, the percentage of Canadians of Asian origin in the population has increased over the last five years as Asia is now the number one source of immigrants to Canada. It will come as no surprise that the third most spoken language after English and French is Chinese, followed closely by an array of Asian languages such as Vietnamese, Tagalog, Punjabi and Tamil. With the declining Canadian birth rate, Asians will account for much of the population increase since the last census. In fact, a recent report puts the percentage of Asians on the West Coast at about 18 per cent, with the result that in the last provincial election in British Columbia, Asians of Indian, Filipino and Chinese descent competed for parties that spanned the political spectrum from left to right. In the future, Asians will continue to play an increasingly important role in the development of Canadian society.

There has been a growing recognition of the importance of the Asia-Pacific community in international trade over the last decade. Our government has paid close attention to this trend by placing an emphasis on developing linkages with this region. One of Canada’s major assets in its quest for closer cultural, political and economic ties with the region is its population of Asian descent.

As Canadians, we pride ourselves on the diversity of our nation and on our tolerance and respect for differences that we have come to realize are our greatest strength. We have even enshrined these principles in the Multiculturalism Act of 1988. Nevertheless, we have been slow to recognize the historic and present day contributions of our multicultural communities at a national and institutional level. We have been much slower than the United States which, while it describes itself as a melting pot, has established Asian-American academic programs at universities across the country.

The influence of Asians on our collective culture is evident when we examine the current state of Canadian literature. The voice of Canada, as it is reflected to the world, is increasingly multicultural. There are many writers of Asian descent who have won numerous national and international literary awards, names such as Paul Yee, Michael Ondaatje, Anita Rau Badami, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Wayson Choy and Rohinton Mistry. Joy Kogawa's moving novel, *Obasan*, changed forever the way we viewed our past and may have influenced the Japanese Canadian redress settlement in 1988. It is now required reading in many classes in Canada and across the United States. These writers are reshaping how we define what it means to be Canadian.

Canada is benefiting from the diversity of these new voices. Nationally, our culture is maturing as we recognize and integrate new visions of our past, present and future into our collective story. Internationally, we are now recognized for our dynamic literary style within which cultures overlap as the protagonists move across time and space.

Through our literature, we suggest to the world that our brave multicultural experiment is a success. This is not to suggest that Asian contributions are limited to literature. Canadians such as Dr. Lap-Chee Tsui of Toronto, who is a major contributor to the international project in mapping the human genome, and geneticist David Suzuki of Vancouver, who hosts one of the most popular programs on the environment, have become internationally renowned for their contributions to science. Norman Kwong, of Calgary, won the Order of Canada for his contribution to football, along with entry into three sports halls of fame. Financially, Asians have influenced the Canadian business world with their innovative and entrepreneurial spirit.

Honourable senators, while the effect of this motion is largely symbolic, I believe that such symbols are necessary to indicate that our federal government remains committed to encouraging Canada's multicultural communities, both in policy and in practice.

As in British Columbia and the United States, where Asian Heritage Month has long been recognized, this motion would serve as a rallying point around which events can be organized across the country. Even more important, it would publicly acknowledge the contributions of Asian Canadians to the economic, social and cultural development of Canada as a nation.

Honourable senators, I believe it is time we recognized Asian Heritage Month. I hope you will join me in supporting this motion.
