

## **Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy**

### **Yanbian University of Science and Technology**

**Yanji, Jilin, China**

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President Kim, Prof. Kang, professors and students, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I want to thank you for your hospitality and for inviting me to speak to you today. I would first like to bring greetings from the Senate of Canada and from the University of Toronto.

Ever since I was invited to your university, I have been doing some reading about your geography and about the origins of your university. The fact that you are located in a Korean Autonomous Region is fascinating. I do know that there are many autonomous regions within China, but I was not aware of this one.

I realize that I have been invited here not only because I'm a Canadian Senator, but also because of my role as the Chancellor of the University of Toronto. I am aware that your university would like to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with our university.

However, together with the above, I think perhaps the most compelling reason for my being here is because of my interest in human rights and peace in the Korean peninsula. Besides being on the Committee of Women, Peace and Security, I am also an Advisor to the Canada-DPR Korea Association. So today, I would like to spend a little time speaking on these topics, from the perspective of a woman, and a Canadian of Chinese origin who has the utmost desire for peace in the region.

As someone who originated from Asia, my perspective is very different from a person born in Canada. I have experienced living in a war torn country. We were refugees in China during the Second World War. We left Hong Kong for China after the British Colony surrendered,

and we spent the next four years running from the approaching Japanese invasion.

I have very vivid memories of events during the war, of not having the daily necessities, of traveling by transport trucks because they were the only available form of transportation, if you were lucky. We climbed on top of the cargo by rope ladder, and for the small child that I was, it was not easy. We had to hang on for dear life when the trucks were on the move. The only food that was easily transportable and nutritious was hard boiled eggs. I still remember being motion sick and throwing them up, and until recently, I couldn't stand the thought of them.

I remember holding my mother's hand, walking past one of the houses we lived in, in interior China, after a bombing raid, and seeing that the roof and part of the walls were gone.

I never had a toy as a child, and neither did I have shoes. I wore wooden clogs because leather was reserved for boots for the soldiers. On Christmas day, 1945, back in Hong Kong, I had my first doll.

We were fortunate enough to be able to return to our home in Hong Kong after the war, but for many of you and your family members, you have been displaced. Many of you would probably wish to go back to where home was, even just for a visit, but you don't know when that can happen.

From the experiences I have had throughout my life, I learnt never to take anything for granted, and I am always thankful for what we have everyday.

From my understanding of the horrors of war and the life of refugees, I want to draw a parallel between China and Korea after the Second World War. Korea became divided in the 1950's, not unlike China after 1949. Many families were separated. I have heard these sad stories again and again.

In my case, we were very fortunate that my immediate family did not suffer because we lived in Hong Kong. My knowledge of the suffering throughout the Mao years was from close relatives who were in China. After 1949, streams of refugees came into Hong Kong. After the

border was closed, many came illegally, by whatever means. As a young child, my heart would skip a beat when an unexpected call came for my parents, especially in the middle of the night. It meant another relative had escaped across the border.

During one period, we had three refugee families living in one apartment below us. I heard stories of torture, hard labour, separations, and of young Chinese boys forced to the Korean front as “cannon fodder.” Worst of all, we heard of the millions who died from starvation from Mao’s economic policies. I know you or your families are no strangers to all this.

When I read about the refugee situations across the Chinese border, and how the Chinese soldiers round up the escapees and return them to North Korea, it reminds me of what used to be called “the boomerang express” that the Hong Kong government had to return refugees who were caught crossing the border from China.

Refugees who cross the Tumen River to get into China also remind me of those, from another time, who escaped from China into Hong Kong by fishing boats. Some even swam to Hong Kong through shark infested waters.

I am used to hearing of desperate acts committed by desperate people. The horror stories one reads about in places like Longjing, Tumen and Sanhe are heinous crimes committed by desperate people. The only way that problems like these can be tackled would be to improve the living conditions of the people of North Korea.

In 2002, there was an article in a Canadian magazine which described North Korea as a “Hermit Kingdom...the saddest and strangest place on earth.” The writer was part of a TV crew who was there to make a film on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Korean War. His description of Pyongyang as “eerie, silent, dark and deserted” in the morning, and how the people went to work by walking and by bicycles, reminds me of Chinese cities in the late 1970s, when we took our three sons for a visit. China has improved and prospered since then, and so can North Korea.

Our childhood and our experiences have a great influence on our lives. I believe, in my case, it has given me a clearer understanding, as

well as great compassion for the Korean people. The Korean people want to be reunited with their families, and to be able to live comfortably, without ever being in desperate need of food or clothing. People are the same all over the world. They want to be left alone to live their lives.

From my observation, prosperity can be built from many different initiatives, such as trade, education and culture. I will touch on the topic of trade only superficially since I don't know enough about the details in North Korea. What I do know is that it works, because I have seen it with my own eyes with the opening up of China for trade, which was in its infancy at the beginning of the 1970s. The reason I know about this is that my own father was very much instrumental in encouraging Europeans, Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese to invest in China. At that time, the Chinese in Hong Kong were very fearful of the government in the Republic of China, and the only person who could get everyone together was my father, because of his success, his honesty, and his impeccable reputation.

Just look at the situation now. Many of the major commercial players all over China are the same Chinese from Hong Kong. Many international corporations are also vying for the Chinese market. When I compare Hong Kong to South Korea, and North Korea to China under Mao, a parallel can be drawn. The successful business people from South Korea could reach out in the same way that will bring peace and prosperity to the region.

In the area of education, I would first like to congratulate the education system in South Korea for its results in the latest Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on education. South Korea ranked high on academic scores, particularly in Science and Mathematics. This is most impressive indeed. In this respect, many wealthy individuals in South Korea could help the youth in the North to gain education, training and life skills. Here again, I refer to my own experience within my family, where education was of the highest priority, and, in particular, my parents who set up a foundation to help Chinese students from China in areas of higher education.

At this time, I would like to congratulate President Kim for his success and monumental effort in establishing this university ten years ago for the ethnic Koreans in the area. I also want to give my very best

wishes and congratulations on the building of the sister university, the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. To quote from your 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary magazine, the purpose is to lead “North Korea into the New Economy in the Information era that will contribute to the unification of Korea.” I can’t think of a better way to help your cousins in North Korea. It is the best example of using education to build bridges.

As the Chancellor of the University of Toronto, and someone who gives education the highest priority, I encourage all universities to play a key role in engaging with other cultures. This exposure can and does make a difference to both faculty and students, since academics have a tremendous influence on the policies of governments, and can help to diffuse conflicts. For example, one of our very prominent professors at the University of Toronto, Janice Stein, is an important advisor to our Foreign Affairs Minister and the Minister of Defense. Exchanges between citizens, educators and students will bring about better understanding in this rapidly changing world we live in, for the sake of peace for future generations.

We all know that politics and political ideologies divide people. There has been a lot of sabre rattling on the political scene in recent years. The recent summit meeting of North and South Korea, Russia, China, Japan and the United States hopefully will produce results for peace in the region. In the meantime, let us not forget the expressions on the faces of those Koreans who were able to see their family members for the first time in fifty years. They really don’t care where the political boundary is drawn. They just want the freedom to speak, to work, to play, to educate their children, and to be able to be with their family members whenever they wish.

I believe that, in order to bring peace to the region, it is necessary to start from the grassroots, through culture such as the arts and sports, through education, business, the churches and the community of women, from both North and South Korea, as well as from abroad.

You might wonder why I mention women. In case you don’t know, women are the foundation of civil society in every country in the world. We are usually the ones who form community organizations, create non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and lobby for change. Why? Because most of us are the caregivers of family and community, and we

consider the future of nations to be important to the future of our children, so we have a different perspective on the world around us. For example, Stephen Lewis, the United Nations Special Ambassador on Aids, in speaking on the possibility of hope in Africa, said that he has always been astounded at the collective strength of women to bring about change.

For the past few years, I have been involved with the Women, Peace, and Security Committee, composed of parliamentarians and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Canada that seek to recognize the strength of women to rebuild societies in conflict. This group was founded following the passage of UN Resolution 1325 which called for, among other things, the increased participation of women at all levels, including in decision making, in conflict situations, peacekeeping operations, and to examine the unique experience of women, and girls, in these situations.

The UN Resolution 1325, coupled with the establishment of diplomatic relations between Canada and North Korea, led to promising developments in terms of engagement between Canadians and citizens of the North Korea. As a result, in April 2002, the Canada-DPR Korea Association was formed. We believe that, when conflicts are entrenched, as in the case of North Korea and the United States, Canada can play a role by listening and attempting to understand. For all those involved, it just may be necessary to take a first step to get to know each other again as human beings.

The latest initiative of the Canada-DPR Korea Association is a project, in the planning stage, to foster a dialogue on Canadian foreign policy development among Canadian women, including parliamentarians, with their counterparts in the Korean peninsula, women from both the North and the South. The forum is called “Women and Peace-building,” and focuses on women’s role in peace-building and strengthening women’s participation in civil society.

Twenty-five Canadian women, half of whom will be of Korean ancestry, under thirty years old, and have connections with the Korean peninsula, will address Canada’s role in peace building on the Korean peninsula and related policy questions. The Korean Canadian women will be the main participants. This project will take advantage of the

perspectives of young women who will bring fresh insights to old conflicts. It is hoped that the new generation, especially women, may be better equipped to break down barriers.

What else is Canada doing for North Korea, you may ask? Over the past five years, Canada has spent 40 million dollars on food aid that saves lives today, but this does not solve the underlying economic or strategic problems in the long-term. So, Canadians need to be creative. After all, our top foreign policy priority is to project Canadian values of democracy, peace, justice and human security. For that reason, Canadian civil society, church groups, the Korean Canadian community, and organizations such as the Canada-DPR Korea Association, are helping to build human bridges through sports, culture and education.

We are all aware that there are many conflicts in the world, and there are many great minds engaged in solving them through diplomatic and other means. On my part, I'm here speaking as a Canadian citizen who believes that all people in the world share a common humanity, and that many conflicts can be solved through personal relationships. In my role as a Canadian Senator and as the Chancellor of the University of Toronto, I strive to contribute to peace among peoples and establish links between our universities.

Thank you.