

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

The Canadian Tapestry: a View From Within

Bishop White Committee

Royal Ontario Museum (ROM)

Toronto, Ontario

Jan. 21, 2003

I want to thank the Bishop White Committee for inviting me to speak to you today. In particular, I wish to thank Freddy Fleming, and Deanne Orr, with whom I met last year to discuss the type of audience the Committee usually has for this luncheon, and the topic that might be of interest to you. It was decided that I should speak about my experience over the last forty-three years in Canada, as a female member of a visible minority, and within the context of Canadian immigration and the policy of multiculturalism. In other words, my views on Canada.

I first came to Canada at the end of August, in 1959, on a student visa, to study at McGill. Having spent two years in a multi-national private girl school in the south of England, and having traveled half the way around the world from Hong Kong to Montreal, I was very surprised to meet girls in residence who had never been out of their province, never mind out of Canada. You may think it sounds funny now, but I was asked, “What’s Hong Kong, and where is it?” For the first time in my life, at age 18, I had to define Hong Kong and where it’s located geographically. A lot has changed in Canada since then.

There weren’t too many students in Canada from Hong Kong at the time, and McGill was the only well known Canadian university abroad. There were very few ethnic Chinese students at McGill, and I was one of a dozen girls there. Canada was, for me, a country where I came to learn and I was expected to return to Hong Kong afterwards.

So, how come I’ve been living here for over 43 years? Well, I met my future husband in university where he was attending Medical school. I became a Canadian citizen when we got married after my graduation in 1962. The immigration rules were very different then. My Canadian

citizenship was automatic because I held a British passport. There was no residency requirement for British subjects at that time.

Before I go any further in speaking about Canadian immigration, I need to clarify one detail. My experience is that of an ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong, and I don't speak on behalf of other minority groups.

Often the word "Chinese" is used to describe a unified group, but this can't be further from the truth. I need everyone to understand that ethnic Chinese who originated from various parts of the world are culturally and linguistically different. The Chinese from Hong Kong are very different from the ones from China, India, the West Indies or South America. Many of us from Hong Kong speak English, whereas those from India speak Hindi (or English), and those from South America speak Spanish and Portuguese. And, culturally speaking, the type of government and society we grew up in also made us think and behave differently.

Now I'll speak about my experience and observations in Canada over the last forty odd years. During my years at McGill, I lived in a university residence, and had little contact with the Chinese community in Montreal, but I heard about RCMP raids across Canada, and of the government and public perception of illegal Chinese immigration. At that time, the RCMP suspected that of 21,000 Chinese immigrants who had arrived since 1950, 11,000 were illegal, but this was never proven.

The Chinese communities charged the government with racial discrimination in its immigration policy, which was discriminatory at that time, and said that being ethnic Chinese was perceived as equivalent to being a criminal. Those were bad times for the Chinese communities in Canada.

From the end of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1960s, it became obvious to the Diefenbaker government that our immigration policy needed to be overhauled. The 1960s were important years in the formulation of our present day immigration policy.

In 1962, the year I became a Canadian citizen, Canadian immigration regulations gave rights of landing to those with skills to stay in Canada. In fact, a friend who wanted to pay a visit to Canada in 1964 was asked by the

Canadian immigration officer in Hong Kong to apply for landed immigrant status. He said that if she didn't like it in Canada, she could always leave.

Nineteen sixty-seven was an important year for many of us. It was Canada's 100th birthday, and it was also the year when the infamous speech of Charles de Gaulle was made. We were living in Montreal then. Expo was on, and my husband was writing his Fellowship exams in plastic surgery. Montreal was also the city where members of the FLQ were setting off bombs, even in mail boxes, which later led to the imposition of the War Measures Act by Prime Minister Trudeau.

Right after my husband passed his exams, we thought it was time to leave. At that time, he already had a junior staff position offered to him at McGill, and he was also offered a partnership in a group practice in North Carolina, where he had done part of his internship. Since Montreal was no longer an option, he asked for my opinion about moving to North Carolina. He said we would be considered honorary whites, and he would be working in an all white hospital. I said to him, aside from the Vietnam War that was raging at the time, and he might be drafted, I would never survive living in any of the Southern states because of my belief in equality of all people. I can just imagine what might happen to us because our son, (we had one at the time) was playing with black children. Anyway, we moved to Toronto.

Toronto in 1967 was monotonous, and in comparison to Montreal, it was very dull. However, we never had any regret in moving here because, in the 60s, Toronto started to become what it is today: an interesting, multicultural city, as well as a financial centre of Canada. We were told that Montreal's loss was Toronto's gain, but there was more to it than that. The other important part of the equation was immigration.

Nineteen sixty-seven was a major turning point for Canadian immigration because it marked the end of a discriminatory policy. The points system was introduced which meant that those with skills Canada needed could enter as independent immigrants. Also, graduates from Canadian universities or colleges who had been offered jobs could apply for landed status to remain in Canada. This encouraged immigration of the skilled, and those seeking higher education. Toronto happened to be one of the cities of choice for immigrants to settle.

Nineteen sixty-seven was also the year when the Cultural Revolution in China spilled over to Hong Kong. There were riots in the streets, and because of the unrest, many citizens wanted to emigrate.

Many of my school friends from Hong Kong immigrated to Canada then. So, after we moved to Toronto, more and more old friends moved here. It was really amazing to have a reunion of friends from primary and high schools in Hong Kong here in Toronto. Most of these friends are still living here today.

The 1960s were not only the years that the face of Toronto began to change; the same phenomenon happened in other major cities in Canada because of immigration. As far as the Chinese from Hong Kong were concerned, Toronto and Vancouver were their cities of choice. Many other immigrant groups seemed to choose these cities as well. One of the most noticeable changes was the increase in the number of ethnic restaurants.

The 1970s were best remembered as the years my husband got his medical practice established, and the years I spent with our children and the birth of our last child. We moved into the home we are still living in today. Many of you may remember that those were the years when there was an exodus of medical personnel to the U.S., mostly for economic reasons. My husband was tempted to make the move as well, since as he said, that was what all the doctors talked about in the coffee room. For what I believed were very strong reasons, and they were the Canadian values we hold so dear, I made the decision for our family to stay in Canada. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here speaking to you today! My husband has said that one of the smartest things he has done in his life was listening to me.

I found it interesting to read the essay written by Rudyard Griffith in the April, 2002 issue of Maclean's magazine. He proposed that immigration rates should be doubled, not because of economic reasons, but to ensure the preservation of a common set of Canadian values and way of life. He said, over the last five years, according to the data the Dominion Institute has gathered, that immigrants know more about Canada and Canadian history than natural-born Canadians who tend to take Canada for granted. Immigrants also have a unique perspective on what it means to be Canadian because, for most immigrants, coming to Canada is the result of a rational choice. I can certainly testify to this statement about making a rational

choice. We had the choice to move to the U.S., but we chose to remain in Canada.

The 1970s were important to Canada because in 1971 Canada became the first country in the world to adopt a multicultural policy. It was during those years that the foundation was set for what Canada represents today – a bi-lingual, multicultural country with strong links to Asia.

Going back to the infamous speech made by General Charles de Gaulle in 1967 in Montreal:

Vive Montréal! Vive le Québec! Vive le Québec libre!

In order to deal with the forces of disintegration in Canada, led by René Levesque, the federal government launched a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. The fourth and final report, *The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups*, made the government realize that the country was not bicultural, but multicultural.

In 1971, Prime Minister Trudeau announced the implementation of a multicultural policy for Canada. He said:

“National unity...must be founded on confidence in one’s own individual identity, out of this grow respect for that of others and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions.”

This policy provided all Canadians with a common set of values and a sense of identity. Its implication is very important to immigrants as well as all ethnic minorities who had been in Canada for generations because it meant that there was nothing wrong in taking pride in one’s cultural origins. This policy also helped to make new immigrants to feel welcome in Canada.

On October, 1970, diplomatic relations were established between Canada and the People’s Republic of China, which helped to bolster the confidence of the Chinese communities in Canada, despite the fact that they may not be communist sympathizers. In 1973, Prime Minister Trudeau visited China and met with Premier Zhou Enlai, and subsequently, an agreement was signed for re-unification of Chinese Canadians with their family members in China. By that agreement, the Communist Chinese government agreed to let their citizens out. Following this agreement, there

was a large influx of Chinese immigrants, (there were 55,000 in 1973 alone) and again, many of them chose to live in cities like Toronto.

So, in the 1970s, travels between Canada and China began, but it was not easy to get a visa as a tourist. We heard of arranged groups visiting China by the latter part of the 1970s, but one needed to be invited, and it was not possible to get visas to tour as a family. So, I took a different route, I went through my father's connections, and got the visas approved by Beijing for my entire family. In 1979, my husband and I, with our three sons, spent our Christmas holidays touring China. China was very backward then, but with subsequent trips, we have seen unbelievable progress.

At the end of the 70s, I was back at school, studying fashion design. Our youngest son was only five, so those were hectic years. I didn't have much time being involved with the community, but we did keep up with our friends, both in the medical community, and in the Chinese community in Toronto. By then, there were a lot of students of Chinese origin in Canadian universities.

In 1979, we heard about the big controversy when the programme *Campus Giveaway* was aired on W5 implying that Chinese students were taking over the university campuses across Canada. Some of our friends were activists demanding an apology from CTV. Chinese students across the country were very angry. The problem, as I saw it, was that the good feeling of the multicultural policy of Canada, and the country's improved relations with China, was once again overtaken by overt racism. The main objection to that programme was the implication that if you looked Chinese, then you were presumed to be foreign, no matter how many generations you may have been in Canada, and your citizenship didn't count either. This, unfortunately, applies to any visible minorities, and we continue to see it from time to time, and since Sept. 11, it has become worse.

To look at the good side, the end of the 70s was a turning point for social activism among Chinese Canadians, and their leaders were the educated young people from Hong Kong.

A prominent feature of the 1980s was the influx of business immigrants into Canada, and even though there had always been business immigration, mainly led by the British, the Americans, and the West Germans, their numbers were gradually overtaken by the Chinese from

Hong Kong. By 1985, Hong Kong immigration accounted for 40% of all business immigration. By 1994, immigration from Hong Kong was 19.7% of the total. Even though the total number of ethnic Chinese in Canada was very small, it nevertheless brought attention because the Chinese look different.

Many of you are aware, I'm sure, of the profile, as well as the controversy surrounding the business immigration programme by the end of the 1980s, as well as the racism that went with it. It was not unusual to read articles in the newspapers about neighbourhoods not wanting the Chinese to move in, and neighbourhood associations fighting the development of shopping malls that would attract Chinese shoppers. Interestingly, the developers had no intention of destroying neighbourhoods because it would be bad business, and many of the neighbours were actually happy that their real estate had increased in value.

We kept hearing the terms “monster homes” and “yacht people”. Despite the small numbers among the total population, immigrants from Hong Kong were described as a tide that would engulf Canada. Such comments were a reminder of a much earlier time, when MP Thomas McBride, of Cariboo, B.C., said in the House of Commons that the object of the Chinese was to “get control of the Pacific coast, including all of British Columbia.” That was in 1923 just before the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Since the early 1980s, Hong Kong had been targeted in the search for capital by many governments around the world. Canada happened to be the No.1 choice of immigrants from Hong Kong. Part of the reason was our rights culture, and the existence of cities like Toronto, where immigrants could feel at home. By the end of the 1980s, there was a general perception that all Chinese from Hong Kong were rich. Even our children were puzzled when they were told that since their parents came from Hong Kong, they must be rich! Even taxi drivers talked that way.

If one looks at the numbers, one could see what a windfall the business immigration programme was for Canada. In 1991, business immigrants accounted for 8.5% of total immigration, and it happened to be dominated by people from Hong Kong. According to one official estimate from the Canadian Commission in Hong Kong, in 1991 alone, as much as CD\$5 billion of Hong Kong capital flowed into Canada.

Why, you would ask, did the people from Hong Kong want to emigrate? After all, they seemed to be doing well in a free capitalistic economy. The reason was the signing of the Joint Declaration between the British and Chinese governments for the return of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China. That sent jitters through the population in Hong Kong, particularly because many of them were refugees from China after 1949. So, for these Hong Kong immigrants, Canada was a haven of freedom and democracy.

I remember the situation in Hong Kong in the 1980s, not only the exodus of money, but also of professional skills. During a discussion on one of our visits there, a cousin of mine was saying that businesses in Hong Kong were suffering badly from the brain drain and the situation was desperate.

Emigration was the talk of the day, and there were magazines published to help Hong Kong people to emigrate to other countries. I remember the one that was called *The Emigrant*.

From my perspective, as someone who has been living in Canada for a long time and has seen how the country has evolved, while having strong connections with the business community in Hong Kong (and actually being treated by the new immigrant group as “one of them”), I was in a unique position to be able to look at the situation from both sides.

Since the introduction of the points system in the late 60’s, with the influx of immigrants from all over the world, Canada had become more worldly and outward looking by the beginning of the 1990s. Canadians have more exposure to other cultures, and Canada has become more open to the outside world, both economically and culturally.

From the middle of 1990s, due to the downturn in the Canadian economy, the number of immigrants from Hong Kong decreased, and their numbers were gradually replaced by immigrants from mainland China.

According to Citizenship and Immigration statistics, the top source country for immigration since 1999 has been China, and in 2001, the numbers reached the equivalent of 16.1% of annual immigration. The main reason for this is because of Canada’s needs for immigrants with skills and

education, and this need is filled by many independent immigrants from China.

I haven't done any research on recent immigrants from China, but my guess is that their reasons for immigrating to Canada are, again, freedom and democracy, as well as economic reasons. However, from those I have spoken to, and these were well-educated individuals, the economic reasons are no longer that strong. They told me that there were too many obstacles to advancement in this country. And, because China is opening up for economic development, some have already gone back, and others are planning to return to China.

Now, we'll take a closer look at our immigration policy. Canada is one of the major immigrant-receiving countries. Ever since the end of the Second World War, the demographics of this country have been just as much of a concern as the need for labour and economic investments. Our birth rate is below the replacement rate of 2.1, and without immigration, Canada will eventually disappear. At the moment, one fifth of our population increase is dependent on immigration. Aside from that, our population is aging. By 2020, 20% of our population will be over the age of 65. Not having enough young people working to pay taxes, there is great concern that we are not going to be able to sustain our pension system.

There are many views on immigration, and I'll only touch on a few. There are those who say we don't have a population problem, and we should close our doors to non-European immigration. This sounds like a throw back to the 19th century when it was suggested in B.C. that no one who couldn't speak or write in one of the European languages should be admitted into the province.

The question is: should immigration be based on the colour of one's skin? Or should it be based on skills, education and business investments? Successive governments in Canada since the 1960s knew the answers, and today we see the results of their policies. Today, we have a very diverse country.

You might wonder why Canadian immigration policies have resulted in such a large number of non-white immigrants in this country. This started from the 1960s when the points system was introduced and independent immigrants were admitted based on their skills and education. Many non-

white immigrants came into Canada under those criteria. And then, in the 1980s, with the business immigration programme, again, there was a large inflow of non-white immigrants, the majority of them from Hong Kong.

In any migration situation, there is push and pull. People don't uproot themselves for the fun of it. There have to be reasons, and these are economic, political, as well as for family reunification. You never see a mass exodus of people from politically stable and economically viable environments - for example, the countries of Western Europe. Political instability, in certain parts of the world, will cause people to emigrate, and the ones who manage to get into countries of their choices are the ones with the money, education and needed skills.

An example I can give would be in reference to immigrants from Hong Kong. In 1967, when the points system was introduced in Canada, there were riots in the streets in Hong Kong, and many people with skills wanted to emigrate because of political instability.

When the business immigration programmes were introduced in the 1980s, it was also the same time that Margaret Thatcher signed the Joint-Declaration with the People's Republic of China for the return of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China on July 1, 1997.

Hong Kong was affluent in the 1980s, and so it became a target for many western countries, including Canada, which saw an opportunity to attract business immigrants. The fact that the people of Hong Kong were faced with the prospect of a future under communist rule, despite the fact that Hong Kong was to remain as a Special Administrative Region, gave the push for emigration.

With our immigration policy of qualification based on business investments, skills and education, which by the way is not unique to developed countries, the route is opened to those with these qualifications from developing countries. Some who argue against immigration from non-white countries use brain-drain as an argument, and they say that countries such as Canada should not take these people away from their countries of origin, so that they can stay and help their own countries. But, what about freedom of choice? Isn't that a basic human right?

People will always go where there are better opportunities. I'll cite an example of immigrants from Hong Kong again. By the 1990s, with the recession in Canada, and the economic boom in Hong Kong and in Asia, many of these immigrants returned to Hong Kong to work. Another phenomenon I found interesting was that an increasing number of young Canadian-born Chinese were also going to Hong Kong and China to work. That was a true test of economic opportunities.

In fact, there was such a boom in Hong Kong in the 1990s that there were a lot of young people from western countries looking for work there. We saw them everywhere, and many of them were from Britain. By then, no one seemed to be worried about the change of sovereignty, except the foreign press, which didn't really know what was going on.

In 1997, around the time of the change of sovereignty, I remember reading in the newspapers about the prices of properties in Hong Kong. Homes on the Peak were selling as high as US\$ 50 million, an unthinkable amount by most standards. Of course, since then, with the Asian economic crisis which started in South-East Asia, the situation has become very different.

In the last few years, there are an increasing number of Chinese Canadians who work between continents, particularly those who were born or grew up in Canada, and are acculturated in both eastern and western cultures. These are some of the examples of Canadians who will help Canada in a globalized economy in this millennium, and their special skills should be utilized.

We all know that animals migrate to survive, and humans do the same. So, migration is nothing new, it only became complicated when political borders were erected. According to the *Economist*, the potential benefits to the world of liberalizing migration dwarf those from removing trade barriers, especially in countries with an aging population and sluggish economies because migrants move readily to areas where labour is in short supply. An important and thought provoking suggestion, by the same article, was that migration should be less restrictive, and strict border controls should be loosened to facilitate the return of migrants to their home countries. In other words, to have freer movements of people. The fact that many Chinese Canadians are now working in Asia is a testament to the fact that people will always go where there are economic opportunities.

We all know that there is no such thing as a perfect country because it's built by people, and as long as there are people, there will be discrimination. Just as an example, the Chinese from mainland China who have moved into Hong Kong are being discriminated against by the Hong Kong Chinese because they are now the second class citizens.

If we look at the latter part of the 20th century, Canadian immigration policy has become non-discriminatory. Canada has also done a great deal as a humanitarian country. We accepted 100,000 displaced Persons from Europe after the Second World War. By the beginning of the 1980s, Canada was the country which had taken in the most "boat people", a total of 60,000 refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. During the Tiananmen Massacre, mainland Chinese students who were in Canada were allowed to remain here. In the 1990s, Bosnian as well as Rwandan refugees were also taken in by Canada. I'm only mentioning a few that come to mind, and there were many others. But, has Sept. 11 put a damper on the welcoming nature of Canadians?

The result of a recent poll taken last November, for Maclean's magazine, Global TV and the Citizen, was splashed across the media that 44 % of 1,400 Canadians polled wanted the number of immigrants from Muslim countries restricted. The Ottawa Citizen quoted pollster Michael Sullivan as saying that the result "questions our commitment to the mosaic."

I personally don't have any confidence in polls, since it depends on how the question is asked, and who are the people asked, and whether they understood the question properly, so I raise the question as to why polls are done at all? There is never a simple answer to a complicated issue. I often suspect the reason for polls is to sway public opinions and at the same time, sell newspapers and magazines. In the meantime, human beings are being hurt. The media has a strong influence on the way we think, and therefore, journalists have tremendous responsibility to the Canadian population.

Rosie DiManno said it well in the Toronto Star, (Dec. 23, 2002) that "Polls are contrived journalism. They have neither nuance nor context...they are notoriously unreliable, as polling political parties have discovered to their dismay."

From my personal standpoint, I am glad I live in a tolerant society in which immigrants from all over the world would be proud to call it home. Despite the backlash after Sept. 11, Canadian society stays together, and that is because Canadians have the fundamental right to disagree with each other, and we also have a right to be heard. In a recent visit of the Aga Khan to Canada, he described Canada as “a most successful pluralistic society on the face of our globe,” and he called Canada an “amazing global asset.”

Our country has been enriched by the cultures from immigrants from all over the world who, through our multicultural policy, have been encouraged to be proud of their own heritage. By so doing, Canadian citizens maintain their links to many parts of the world. I see this as a great advantage to Canada. In the globalized world we live in today, these links are of utmost importance, and if utilized well, it can mean that Canada will no longer be dependent economically on any one country. After all, there is a big world out there that needs Canadian products, and Canadians of various cultural heritages can help bring prosperity to our country.

Now, back to our home, Toronto. It has certainly come a long way from the 1960s when we first moved here. It is now the most cosmopolitan city in the world, and linguistically the most diverse. It is an interesting city to live in, and, when we travel, it's a home we are always happy to come back to.

A little over a year ago, during an interview on T.V. in Hong Kong, where I was invited to speak at the Global Summit of Women, I was asked whether I would return to Hong Kong to live when I retire, and my answer was, I would go up to the lake, listen to the loons call and watch the mist rise at dawn. For Canada is home.

Thank you.