

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

### **A Twist of Fate: from Hong Kong to Canada**

**Granite Club**

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Thank you very much for asking me to speak to you today. I was told that you would be interested in hearing something about my life, so I'll tell you how I ended up in Canada.

This talk has the title "A twist of fate: from Hong Kong to Canada" because, according to my parents' plans, I am not supposed to be here at all. So what am I doing living in Canada, as a Canadian fashion designer, as a Canadian Senator, and as the Chancellor of the University of Toronto?

When I was fifteen, my parents decided that it was time for me to join my sister to study in England. The focus for most Hong Kong parents at the time was on the importance of obtaining a British education. This also followed a tradition in my family of sending children abroad. At age 12, my father was sent to England, along with his younger brother.

It was my parents' intention that I would go on to university in England, and then return to Hong Kong, but my life took an interesting turn. When I think back, the defining moment happened in the following year when I was 16 and in a British boarding school. I wrote my parents to say that I was leaving after the end of the school year to return to my school in Hong Kong to finish my last year of high school. I didn't ask them for permission - I just told them my decision.

Why did I do that? The most important reason was the unsuitability of a strict boarding school regime for my personality. I have a creative mind and good self-discipline. The last thing I needed was to have what I considered unnecessary discipline imposed upon me. I didn't need anyone to tell me when I could have a bath, or when I should write my parents. Being regimented from the moment I got up in the morning to the moment I went to sleep at night, seven days a week, was destroying my imagination and my sense of self-worth.

In a boarding situation, you are also supposed to fit into the group, but I am very much a loner. I like having my own space and doing my own thing. I want to have time to think. Sharing a room with 8 girls didn't give any of us privacy. I did learn to live, and make friends with girls from all over the world, but I yearned to be left alone at times. I was always looking for an empty room in the school to go in and shut the door. I only managed that very infrequently on some weekends.

Sports were emphasized in British boarding schools, but I don't like sports. There were times we had to play field hockey, when I would much rather have painted or read. Whenever I could, I walked in the afternoon, instead of doing sports.

I excelled in Math, according to the teachers. Another girl from Thailand and I were given special tutoring, and we were passing public exams much earlier than the other girls. The school was convinced that I should read Mathematics at university, but that was not what I wanted to do, though at the time I had not focused on what I wanted to study at university. I loved math because it's so logical, but I knew that wasn't enough to become a Mathematician.

I was first in my class consistently, but I was very unhappy.

My parents were not pleased with my "decisive" letter, especially my father who had plans for me to go to Oxford, following in his footsteps and that of my older sister. Since I was an excellent student, he had little doubt that I would get in. He knew, however, that I was very head-strong. So, I returned to my old school in Hong Kong to do my matriculation.

When I went to England, I jumped 1 year ahead, so, when I came back to Hong Kong, I was a year ahead of my former class mates. The school system in Hong Kong was slightly different from that in England. Moving back to Hong Kong had also helped me to change my focus from Math to Liberal Arts. It was a simple decision. The Math standard in Hong Kong was much higher than that in England, so I couldn't catch up anyway. Here again, I see fate working towards my studying history, which I have continued throughout my life.

Changing focus from Math to Liberal Arts meant that I had to do 2 years work in one in order to cover the curriculum. Being determined to matriculate at the end of that school year, I borrowed notes from schoolmates and did nothing but study. I matriculated in 1958, still a year ahead of my former classmates.

I had to decide where I was going to attend university the following year. I had already made up my mind that I wasn't going back to England. One of my uncles had just got his PhD from Princeton, and suggested that I should apply to the Ivy League schools in the U.S., but my father, being anti-American, said no child of his was going to the U.S. to study. So, that left the rest of the English speaking world - Canada and Australia.

In the 1950s, Australia was not considered a choice for academic students from Hong Kong. Since I wanted to go abroad again, I applied to the University of Toronto and McGill. When both acceptances came, my father chose McGill because McGill was much better known around the world than U. of T. at that time.

So, that's how I arrived in Canada on a student visa, still expecting to return to Hong Kong after graduation. I was the first member of my extended family to come to Canada to study.

But, in another twist of fate, I ended up staying in Canada and becoming a Canadian citizen. I met my husband, a Canadian citizen, in his final year of Medical school at McGill, when I entered as a sophomore. We were married when I graduated in 1962, against my mother's wishes. She would rather I had married someone wealthy in Hong Kong, instead of a poor Canadian medical doctor.

When I got married, I had a British passport. At that time, anyone with a British passport, who married a Canadian citizen, became a citizen automatically. So that's how I became a Canadian!

Becoming a Canadian citizen was very meaningful to me because I never felt I had a country before. Ethnic Chinese of my generation, who grew up in Hong Kong, would know what I am talking about. At school, we were not allowed to study modern Chinese history because of the Opium Wars. We lived in a British Colony but we were neither British nationals nor Chinese nationals.

Despite the fact that residents of Hong Kong had British passports at the time, ethnic Chinese were treated as second-class citizens. These passports were changed to Hong Kong passports in the 1970s by the colonial government so that the holders would have no right of abode in Britain.

A sense of belonging in Canada grew on me over the years. I take great pride in everything Canadian.

Looking back, there were two occasions when my husband wanted to move to the U.S. because of the opportunities for his medical practice there. By the 1970s, there was also a lot of peer pressure from other doctors who were making the move. In fact, during one period, moving to the U.S. was the overwhelming topic of conversation in the doctors' coffee room at the Scarborough General Hospital.

I remember twice strongly defending Canadian values, our way of life, the relative safety of our cities for our children to grow up in, and the non aggressive policy of our government, which is an important issue for me because we have three sons. The end result was that we didn't move, and we are the staunch Canadians that we are today.

As an achiever, being a stay-at-home wife and mother was not enough for me. I did stay home for 12 years to raise our 3 boys because we had them spaced almost 4 years apart. My reasoning was that I wanted one in school for one year before the arrival of the next baby. We were told that doctor's families are atrocious in family planning, but we did it! So, when our youngest was five and going to school all day, that was when I went back to school full time.

I gave myself three options: to go to graduate school to do a Masters degree in History; to study child psychology, which I was very interested in, or to go into fashion design. You may think there is no connection between the three, but I have always had very diverse interests. My choice at that time was fashion design because I felt a need to expand my artistic talent.

I spent the next three years, full time, doing the diploma course in Fashion Arts at Seneca College. It was very good for me to learn technical skills which were totally different from what is taught in universities. I was able to draw, to paint and to express myself with different mediums.

Fashion, unlike what most people think, is not glamorous. It's a lot of hard work. It is about discipline and skills training. Everything I learnt has served me well in my life.

When I graduated with High Honors in creative knitwear, I realized that it should be the focus of my own business. From 1981 to 1995, I ran my fashion business, until I returned to graduate school fulltime.

To this day, I value what I learned from managing my own fashion business. Aside from designing and manufacturing, the people skills I acquired dealing with agents, buyers and special clients have come in handy. By the time I became actively involved with the community in Toronto, I was already experienced in dealing with the media, and promotion, since it was an important part of my business.

I had 14 wonderful and eventful years in business. I met a lot of people and made many friends. Clients are still wearing my designs because they are timeless. I guess I really made a mark because some people still connect the name "Vivienne Poy" to fashion design, and nothing else. As recently as this April in Vancouver, of all things, in our hotel elevator, an American couple was riding up with me when the woman suddenly said, "I know you. You're Vivienne Poy, the fashion designer!"

In the early 1990s, while still working as a designer, I became interested in research and writing, and in 1994, I completed my first book on the subject of my ancestors. The following year, I closed my fashion business and returned to academic studies as a graduate student at the University of Toronto. Between 1995 and 1997, I completed my Masters Degree in History, wrote another book, and entered the PhD programme at the University of Toronto.

By the summer of 1998, I had completed my course work in the PhD programme, and was studying for my comprehensive exams when I suddenly received a call from the Prime Minister's office, asking me if I would accept an appointment as a Senator!

Over the past six years, I have often been asked "how does one become a senator?" "Can you work towards it or plan for it?" I know some who lobby for the position, but more often than not, they are unsuccessful.

Senators come from very diverse backgrounds, and I can only comment on my own case.

I had little interest in the Senate. In fact, I knew little about it until my appointment in the fall of 1998, and then I had to be a fast learner. Senators are generally older than MPs because we are chosen on the basis of our life experiences and contributions to our communities. In my case, I was very involved in helping the community, be it in the arts – working with theatres and art galleries - or seniors' homes, and other social services, such as women's shelters, or in higher education, at McGill University and the University of Toronto.

I was active in the community because that was the way I was brought up. I learnt from my elders the importance of giving back to society. Chinese culture is no different from Christianity in teaching, that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We are lucky to have enough to give to those who are in need.

So how did I become a Senator? I believe it was because of my involvement in the community that my name was noticed. The call from the Prime Minister's office literally came like a bolt of lightning out of the blue. It was the greatest surprise of my life, and this happened six years ago.

At the time, I was happily doing my own thing in the community, with a new appointment as a Trustee of the National Gallery from Heritage Minister, Sheila Copps, and pursuing a PhD degree in History at the University of Toronto. My first reaction to my appointment was – how would I be able to finish my degree? To make a long story short, I delayed my comprehensive exams for a year and a half, in order to learn as much as possible about the Senate, and how I might be able to contribute to Canadian society effectively. Well, I received my degree last year, and I am still getting used to being called Dr. Poy. Up until last November, there was only one Dr. Poy in our family, and that's my husband.

So what is it like being a Senator? I am often surprised by people's reaction to my lack of protocol or sense of status. I believe a Senator is no more than a public servant, and the privilege we have is that of serving Canadians. My appointment gave me a chance to serve Canadians across the country, rather than just in the greater Toronto area. I have since made many

friends from diverse cultures and groups, from coast-to-coast, and in the process, I am learning more about our country.

The greatest privilege in being a Senator is being in the same chamber with representatives from every region of Canada. How many of us have that opportunity in our lives? What better way is there for a Canadian from central Canada to learn about the farmers in Saskatchewan, or the fishermen in Newfoundland, or the lives of the Inuit, and that of the members of our First Nations.

The Senate is a great place for people like me because of the possibility of accessing information that is not so readily available to ordinary Canadians. I can always go up to the senators from the different regions and ask questions. Being a senator also gives us access to Cabinet ministers, which is of the utmost importance in the process of assisting Canadians to cut through our huge bureaucracy.

I have been asked whether there is conflict between my role as a Senator, and that of the Chancellor of the University of Toronto. No - I actually think the two work very well together. In the past year, I have had the opportunity to wear both hats in Canada, and abroad, and it has worked out well. From my perspective, the University of Toronto is a microcosm of Canada, and what is good for one is also good for the other.

I believe if I do a good job of representing the country, I can also represent the University in a similar fashion, both nationally and internationally. This brings back a memory of the post-War years when my father was the representative of the Chinese population in Hong Kong to the Colonial government. Here, as in many other aspects in my life, I have a role model from my own family to follow.

I have also been asked how I became the Chancellor of the University of Toronto. That was another surprise because, at the time, I was a post-graduate student at the University, even though my full time job was that of a Senator. Being elected Chancellor had to be the furthest thing from my mind. All I wanted was to complete my degree. As it turned out, the timing of the nomination was perfect because I already had the defense date for my thesis confirmed. I have to say that I was more concerned about the success of my defense than being elected Chancellor.

As Chancellor of the University of Toronto, I have become a super volunteer with a great deal of responsibility. I took it on because I believe the University should reflect the diversity of its student body, and our students need role models. My academic background helps me in my role to better understand the students I meet with.

Well, I guess I do believe in fate. My move back to Hong Kong at age 17 actually helped me to focus on what I wanted to study in university. I have always loved stories about real people, so the study of history was a perfect fit. The result is my getting all my degrees in History, with the exception of an interim diploma in Fashion Design.

The study of history has proved to be important in my everyday work, particularly in the Senate. My love of reading, of research and of writing has been invaluable because of my need for accuracy in what I say, and what I do. My academic training - in scanning documents, in organizing facts and figures quickly, and of thinking and writing logically - has helped me in public speaking.

It is strange for me to think about how I came to Canada, and of the public positions I now hold. My friends, when I reflect back on my life, the major turning point was that single letter from England, written by a head-strong girl, at the age of 16.