

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Acceptance of Eid-ul-Fitr Award 2005

Queen's Park

December 9, 2005

Distinguished guests, ladies & gentlemen, friends:

"Eid mubarak!" I am very happy to be here with everyone for the 9th annual Eid-ul-Fitr celebration, and I wish to thank my good friend, Mobeen Khaja, for inviting me to speak this evening. I am most honoured that you are bestowing on me the Eid-ul-Fitr 2005 Award, which will be treasured and will hang proudly in my office in Ottawa.

This evening, I have the opportunity to share with you my thoughts of what "Muslim" means to me. It is not only a religion, it is a culture and an Islamic civilization. My very first contact with a Muslim was when I was four and a half years old. We had a manager in one of our family businesses in Hong Kong who avoided pork, and when I asked my parents, they told me that it was because he was a Muslim. He was as Chinese as any of us, and I called him "uncle" as little Chinese children still do to show respect for our elders.

From my knowledge, the Muslims are the Hui minority in N.W. China. They don't look any different from other Chinese; their distinction is their religion and their Islamic culture. The most famous Admiral in Chinese history was Zheng He, (during the Ming dynasty), a Muslim whose father and grandfather made pilgrimages to Mecca. In 1405, Zheng was given the command of the Treasure fleet by the Emperor to sail all over the world to trade and to establish diplomatic relations with foreign countries, and of course, to spread the word of the greatness of the Ming Emperor. The Galleons made a number of trips from 1405 to 1433. The treasure ships were 400 feet in length, much larger than the ones sailed by Christopher Columbus at 85 feet, which sailed across the oceans at a much later date.

It surprises me when the tragic events of September 11th, 2001, are referred to as an "attack on civilization." The assumption is that "civilization" is best represented by American culture, which is very young

compared to many ancient civilizations. I can't help but think of Zheng He, who missed Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese navigator (1469-1524, discovered the route to India around the Cape of Good Hope in 1497-8), in Africa by being there 80 years earlier. We can only speculate on what would have happened if they had met. Realizing the might of the Ming navy, would da Gama have dared to continue to cross the Indian Ocean? And would Admiral Zheng have been tempted to crush those little Portuguese boats in his path, and thereby prevent the Europeans from opening an east-west trade route? The question remains, which is the greater civilization?

Islam is not just a religion; it is a civilization and a way of life. Muslims share a great and proud history and they can claim many of the discoveries that are the foundations of modern science. As my Ismaili friend, Firoz Rasul, (former President of the Ismaili Council for Canada) reminded us, in his speech for this event a few years ago, when Europe was languishing during the dark ages, Baghdad was the centre of a renaissance in thought; art and architecture; in scientific and mathematic innovations. The Muslims established Al-Azhar University in 971 in Cairo, which my husband and I were fortunate to visit, more than 200 years before the first university was established in Europe. Islamic civilizations emphasized intellect, and knowledge, respecting the cultural and intellectual heritage of the Ancient Greeks, the Persians, the Hindus and the Chinese.

What does this mean today? It means that there is a lot for Muslims to be proud of. The fact that Muslims are among the most highly educated groups in Canada, with 27% having university degrees and working in the "prime labour force group", compared to 17% of the general population, is proof of the value put on education. Muslims are not only well educated, but affluent, and one of the fastest growing and youngest communities in Canada.

Then why, since September 11th, 2001, has it seemed necessary for Muslims to defend themselves against assumptions about their religion, because of the actions of some misguided individuals, who in no way represent the tenets of Islam?

I believe the reason is that the industrialized world has developed in the Judeo-Christian context of society, resulting in the absence of knowledge of other great civilizations, except in academic circles. For this reason, the Western world thinks that anything non-western is uncivilized. A lack of

knowledge and understanding of other cultures in today's world can lead to marginalization, and the fear and hatred that result in violent conflicts as seen in the recent riots in France.

Nevertheless, when incidents of clear bias do occur, it is beyond a nuisance. Racism permeates our security system. Of particular concern is security at our airports. Random checks are never really random. Security personnel at our airports often stop people with certain names and Arabic appearances, to the extent that even Senator Jaffer and her husband are affected. The ignorance behind the assumption that a Muslim has a certain name and certain look never ceases to amaze me. Don't they know that the largest Muslim country in the world is not in the Middle East but Indonesia?

Much of it is ignorance on the part of the media, politicians, and the public. The media has often played a role in this by connecting Muslims to acts of violence. This reminds me of what happened to the Chinese communities in Canada in the 1950s; the mainstream press, as well as the RCMP, equated Chinese ethnicity with illegal immigration, and many Chinese Canadian homes and businesses were raided. So, what happened in the press, and among the Canadian public after Sept. 11th, looked very familiar to me.

Because of September 11th, the Canadian Muslim Congress (CIC) reported an increase of 1600% in hate crimes against Muslim individuals and establishments, between September 2001 and September 2002. Notably, there was a sharp decline in hostile incidents after 2002, largely because of the way in which conflicts were handled by our schools, the police, public organizations, and NGOs. The collective response of society helped to diffuse what could have been a long-term crisis.

Recently, I read an article in the paper entitled "Is multiculturalism on (its) deathbed?" The article came in the wake of the bombings on the subway in London, which some immediately blamed on British multiculturalism policy. Shortly after the July events, a poll conducted by the Strategic Council in Canada for CTV/Globe & Mail found that 7 out of 10 Canadians believed that immigrants should be encouraged to integrate into broader Canadian culture, rather than maintain their ethnic identity and heritage. I wonder whether the pollsters have bothered to take a look at what forced assimilation did to the First Nations peoples and to the Inuit.

Personally, I don't see any contradiction between maintaining one's cultural heritage, and integration. I am Chinese by heritage, British by birth, and Canadian by choice; this does not make me less loyal as a Canadian. In a recent international study, with research over 10 years, and in 13 countries, immigrant youth who maintained their heritage while expressing pride in their chosen countries, have higher self-esteem, and do better in school, than those who try to assimilate totally.

This study provides a solid scientific foundation for the Multiculturalism Act which has put forward an acceptance of diversity as a way of helping newcomers to integrate. To quote former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, when he launched the multicultural policy in 1971, he said, "...National unity...must be founded on confidence in one's own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions..."

Whether pollsters understand this or not, ethno-cultural diversity, such as it is in Canada, is now a hallmark of Canadian identity. Multicultural is what we are as a nation.

An important part of this diversity is represented by our Muslim communities in Canada which have grown significantly over the past two decades. Between 1990 and 2000, there was an increase of 128% in a single decade. The Muslim population is presently estimated to be between 650,000 and 750,000, with 45% living in the Greater Toronto area. With large numbers of immigrants arriving from Asia, this trend is likely to continue in the decades ahead.

Even within ethnic and religious groups, we are not homogenous, making it often difficult for policy makers to determine who speaks for the broader community. An example is the Chinese communities in Canada, which are very diverse, with differences based on when and where we came from. The same is true of our Muslim citizens. Your internal diversity represents a microcosm of Canada's cultural tapestry. There are the distinctions within the religion itself: Sunnis; Shiites, and Ismailis. There are probably other sub-groups I don't know about. Mosque affiliations are often determined by ethnic background, depending on the country of origin of its members.

A lot has been said in the media about the riots in Paris this fall. The question has been posed – could it happen here in Canada? While we can't dismiss the possibility, I think the situation in France is very different. Consider our attitudes towards the hijab; in France, the government sought to ban it, and here we embrace it as just one expression of culture among many others. After all, with the exception of our indigenous peoples, we are all immigrants in Canada anyway.

In France, despite French citizenship, it is immediately evident to all newcomers and their descendants that they are second-class citizens, and are expected to stay in their isolated areas outside of the city centres. Those of old French blood set the rules that others must follow. The children of this under-class know that France doesn't want them, and they don't want France either, but they are not leaving. What Canadians need to learn is that, for the sake of equality for all, we must always be inclusive and respectful to newcomers, and to everyone who doesn't necessarily look like us.

In Canada, even if the first generation may experience some difficulties, usually the second generation has established roots. Here, we share basic values, and beyond this, differences only make our lives more interesting.

A great deal of concern has been expressed about the treatment of Muslims in Canada since September 11th. It has been an opportunity for Canadians to examine how we treat others who are not like us, and whose beliefs are different from our own. On the other hand, Muslims also have had a chance to reexamine their religion, and reflect on their values. We now recognize that we cannot hide in our communities; the solitudes must be broken, and dialogue is essential.

Most of you know Mobeen Khaja as head of the Association of Progressive Muslims of Canada, but in Ottawa, he has also become the President of the Ottawa Asian Heritage Month Society, which brings together other Canadian associations that represent groups from all across Asia. While it is not always easy to work together, this is what multiculturalism is really about. We have the opportunity in Canada to reach out to other communities, and to the mainstream, share our cultures and ideas, and build on each other's contributions to our country. The Ottawa Asian Heritage Month Society has the unique advantage of being able to tap into all the Asian embassies for sponsorship as well.

Since May 2002, I have done my best to encourage all Canadians to learn about Canadians of Asian heritage, by traveling across the country during the month of May; speaking to groups; encouraging dialogue; making friends and promoting multiculturalism. As a result, twelve cities held celebrations last year. Some, as in Vancouver, were massive, with multiple events held every day in the month of May. Others, as in cities like Winnipeg and Ottawa, were a little smaller but expanding rapidly. Creating a fusion of cultures is what Canada is all about.

I know the passion of people like Mobeen Khaja, and many others like him, will help these events to continue and to grow. Celebrating Asian Heritage Month represents a chance to bring our great civilizations together to share with all Canadians. It also gives us the chance to explore the evolving characteristics of Canadian culture, and to create our own unique Canadian identity.

I think it's important that Muslims become more politically active, and I know that this is happening. Now, more than ever, there is a role for organizations like the Association of Progressive Muslims of Canada. Our children must be encouraged to speak up, raise their voices, and get involved; negative myths about particular groups need to be diffused and corrected.

There is no clash of civilizations. Instead, there is a new and emerging global citizenry. Knowledge will be the key to overcoming ignorance in the world. We owe it to our Muslim friends, who push us to think, and redefine what it is to be Canadians.