

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

### **“So, Where Are You Really From?”**

#### **The Asian Diaspora in the Americas Conference University of Illinois, June 18, 2005**

Distinguished guests, scholars and friends:

I would like to thank Professor George Yu for inviting me to speak this evening. I know you have all been listening to a great number of outstanding academic papers, so I am not going to bore you with another one. I am going to tell you the experience of a Canadian who is often asked, “So, where are you really from?” In other words, the story of my experience as an Asian in Canada.

I must first point out that emphasis will be put on ethnic Chinese, not only because I am a member of these communities that originated from different parts of the world, and know it the best among all Asian communities, but also because ethnic Chinese represent, up to now, the majority of Asians in Canada; immigrants from the Indian sub-continent are following close behind. In the past ten years, Chinese has become the third most spoken language in Canada.

Although Asians have a long history in North America, most of the immigrants coming from Asia to Canada arrived less than forty years ago. I went to Canada on a student visa in 1959, just before large numbers started arriving. During the 3 years I was at McGill University, there were very few Asian students. Of the ethnic Chinese students, I was only one of a couple of dozen on the entire campus. The Chinatown in Montreal was very small, and consisted of a few shops and a few restaurants.

Historically, Canada followed the U.S. in its policy towards the Chinese. When in 1947, Chinese exclusion in our Immigration Act was repealed, Chinese families were able to reunite in Canada. However, until the beginning of the 1960s, female Asian immigrants could only enter Canada as wives and daughters of Canadians.

At the end of August, 1959, my mother accompanied me to Canada to drop me off at university. We traveled across Canada starting from Victoria. At the Vancouver airport, I was amazed to see how many “mail order” brides were going through customs. Now, I am only referring to ethnic Chinese since we were arriving from Hong Kong. One tell-tale sign was that they brought with them a lot of gold jewellery; they were over dressed for the long flight, and had too much makeup on, because many were meeting their husbands or in-laws for the first time.

Canada, the U.S. and Australia are the three leading immigrant-receiving countries in international migration in recent times, and Canada was the first to dismantle its colour bar.(Hawkins, 1991).

In 1962, the “white Canada” immigration policy was *de facto* abolished when the Diefenbaker government introduced new regulations. One of the immigrant Chinese women I interviewed for my dissertation said that when she applied for a visiting visa to Canada that year, she was asked by the Canadian immigration officer in Hong Kong to apply as a landed immigrant instead. He said, “...if you don’t like Canada, you can always leave.” That was because she was a secretary who was fluent in English, and Canada was in great need of secretaries at that time. As it turned out, she met her future husband in Victoria, and has remained in Canada ever since. So, Canada gained a secretary who was proficient in English!

By the early 1960s, university students from Asia started to arrive in greater and greater numbers. Many of them stayed after graduation. Some had job offers and some married Canadians. In my case, I also met my future husband, a Canadian, at McGill, and we were married after my graduation in 1962. Because I was born in Hong Kong and had a British passport, I became a Canadian automatically. This rule has since changed.

In 1967, the “points” system in immigration was officially established, and the selection criteria for new immigrants emphasized education, linguistic ability, and Canada’s economic needs. It became the new era of Asian immigration to Canada, because the new policy was officially changed so that women could immigrate to Canada independently instead of having to be a dependent of a Canadian male, eg. as a wife or a daughter.

Since then, when a wife scores more points than her husband because of her skills, she can apply as the head of the household. I have interviewed

quite a few immigrant Chinese women who were in this category. Husbands and wives with equal points would apply as co-applicants. By the end of the 1960s, Canada needed school teachers, and many came from Hong Kong because their training and work experience were recognized. Quite a few of my former school-mates from Hong Kong, who were teachers, immigrated to Canada at the beginning of the 1970s.

Also, in the 1970s, the number of ethnic Chinese students in Canadian universities increased dramatically, which unfortunately, provoked a backlash. In 1979, CTV, a Canadian television network, aired the program called, "Campus Give-away", accusing Canadian universities of selling out to Chinese students, ignoring the fact that the students' admission was based on merit, rather than race. This program sparked nationwide protests in the Chinese communities, especially when many of the ethnic Chinese faces that were shown on the T.V. screen were not foreign students, but that of Canadians of Chinese descent, as well as that of permanent residents of Canada. We have friends who were very involved in these protests, which ultimately led to the establishment of the Chinese Canadian National Council.

Today, at the University of Toronto, where I am the Chancellor, 56% of the student body is of non-European heritage, and the majority of them have Asian faces. This is very much a reflection of the population of the city of Toronto.

One of the major Asian Canadian communities in Toronto is the Vietnamese community. Everyone here is aware of the plight of the Vietnamese refugees during the 1970s. Canada welcomed the largest number of refugees from Vietnam among all developed nations. In 1976, the new *Immigration Act* expanded refugee provisions and outlined a new refugee sponsorship program. Initially, 61,000 refugees settled across Canada, mostly in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia. Our federal government, and Canadians alike, welcomed them with money and aid.

My husband and I took part in sponsoring a family of five with four other couples. The family initially stayed with one of the couples whose children were grown and gone, and I still remember being the one responsible for picking up enough dinner for everyone when the Tran family arrived in Toronto the first evening. Our eldest son took the older of the Tran

boys, who was around the same age, and showed him how to take the subway. This family is ethnic Chinese, and even though the parents only spoke Vietnamese and a bit of French, their children were all sent to Chinese school in Vietnam and spoke Cantonese; that was how we communicated.

Our group contributed money and furniture to help them settle in Toronto, as well as helping them with banking and job hunting. The older children found work pretty quickly. I would say, the most fortunate was the youngest son who ended up going to York University. This was a very lucky refugee family, because the entire extended family received sponsorship to Canada by different groups, including the grandparents.

The cost to our federal government for the settling of the Vietnamese refugees was \$122 million. The Canadian media was full of praise for the refugees, and lauded the government for its spending. While the ethnic Chinese moved on, the arrivals from Vietnam replaced them in some areas of the old Chinatowns across Canada.

In 1988, recognizing the increasing diversity of our nation, Canada became the first, and still the only country, to pass a Multiculturalism Act. The Act formalized a policy that had been in place since 1971, acknowledging the contributions of Canadians of all origins to the building of Canada, and calling for respect for differences. The principles of this Act met their first major challenges in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the arrival of large numbers of immigrants from Hong Kong.

You all know that in the 1980s, there was tremendous competition among immigrant receiving countries to attract wealthy immigrants, particularly those from Hong Kong, who feared the change of sovereignty of the Colony back to China. Our government, like many others, introduced the “business” or “entrepreneurial” category, opening the door to an influx of Hong Kong immigrants.

It was at this time that I was approached to be on the cover of a U.S. magazine, *The World Monitor*, because they were featuring an article on immigrants from Hong Kong. I told them that I was not a new immigrant to Canada, but as far as the magazine was concerned, as long as I was from Hong Kong, I would be suitable. So, in 1989, I had my first experience of being the cover girl of a magazine.

The new immigrants were welcomed by our government and the business sector, but certain segments of Canadian society reacted negatively. Even though affluent immigrants came from many different countries, the Chinese were again the target of racial slurs, particularly in British Columbia. The new affluent Chinese immigrants were dubbed “yacht people” living in “monster homes.”

Even with our government’s best intentions, attitudes take a long time to change, and any change in society is also difficult for the majority to accept, especially when there is perception of competition. I mentioned this in my Maiden Speech in the Senate of Canada, when I talked about the struggle of the Chinese in Canadian history; how they were discriminated against for being poor in the 19<sup>th</sup>, and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and then, discriminated against for being wealthy in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ironic, isn’t it?

The rise of a large concentration of affluent homes owned by ethnic Chinese, and shopping centres where everything you can think of from Asia could be bought, was deemed to be a threat to some in mainstream Canada, even though many had profited from this phenomenon. Since the early 1980s, it hasn’t been necessary for our family to visit any of the Chinatowns in downtown Toronto because there are so many excellent Chinese restaurants and shopping centres everywhere.

In 1982, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was passed, guaranteeing equal rights for all Canadians. Since its passage, the Charter has been well used in the Courts by our citizens. One example is redress for the past wrongful treatment of different groups by the Canadian government, such as the head tax imposed on the Chinese. In 1988, the Mulroney government gave redress to the Japanese Canadians, but in answer to all the other groups, instead of monetary redress, the Canadian Race Relations Foundation was established in 1991 (opened in 1997). This was not considered satisfactory by the different groups, so in our recent budget, \$25 million was set aside for educational and commemorative actions for everyone who lobbied for redress.

We have seen the rise in the status of the Chinese Canadian communities all across Canada during the past few decades. In the 1980s, all of a sudden, it became fashionable to look Chinese, since all Chinese were supposed to be from Hong Kong, and therefore, rich! People off the street,

and even cab drivers, would ask whether my husband and I were of Chinese heritage, and from Hong Kong, of course. Even our sons were asked the same questions. All the expensive shops started hiring Chinese speaking sales staff. Canadian corporations also started advertising in Chinese.

The perception of the change from the ghettos of the old Chinatowns to the mainstream, both in the academic and professional world, and in the economic life of the country, was a real challenge for Canadian society. Today, many of the former Chinatowns have been designated as historic sites by the Department of Canadian Heritage.

By the 1990s, I believe that the federal government, and particularly our Prime Minister at the time, Jean Chretien, wanted to highlight the importance and strength of the Asian communities, and in 1998, I was appointed to the Senate of Canada, making me the first Canadian of Asian descent in history to be appointed to, what we call, the Red Chamber.

Not knowing the Prime Minister; and not having a political background or friends in high places, it took me a year to learn how to be effective as a Senator and to survive in Ottawa.

In the year following my appointment, media attention and public debate was focused on the arrival in British Columbia of boatloads of migrants from Fujian province, claiming refugee status. Unlike the Vietnamese refugees, most of the individuals on these boats were not refugees in the conventional sense. Nevertheless, they were exploited by human smugglers, and driven by their desperate need for a better life.

The media was not sympathetic, and the harsh reaction suggested lingering anti-Chinese sentiments. These migrants on leaky boats happened to be poor and conspicuous. In the meantime, the majority of undocumented migrants continued to arrive in Canada from various parts of the world by plane, often indirectly from Europe and other countries.

Despite the fact that I am an Ontario Senator, Senators in Canada are also appointed to represent minority groups - in my case, the Asian minorities in the country. For that reason, the moment I was appointed, I was literally adopted by groups across the country. So, instead of only traveling back to my constituency of Toronto, I am often asked to speak in different cities across Canada, and to meet various community groups. This has

become very rewarding for me because I am a people person, and over the last 7 years, I have not only traveled all over Canada, I have also made many friends across the country.

I was one of the few Senators who lobbied for a Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights which was established 4 years ago. I believe Canadians cannot afford to become complacent just because we have the Charter of Rights and Freedoms; we must always be vigilant, especially when the popular media does air views that are sure to galvanize public opinion.

In the past twenty years, ethnic Chinese have become the largest group immigrating to Canada, mainly from Hong Kong, until the latter part of the 1990s when China became the number one source country of immigrants to Canada. In 2003, China was followed closely by India, and Pakistan. These mass movements of peoples from Asia have transformed the face of Canada.

Now, Asians from all over the world represent around 10% of the Canadian population, and if the current immigration trend continues, Statistics Canada predicts that visible minorities will make up more than 20% of our total population by 2017. By then, in my home town of Toronto, which is the number one choice city for immigrants, more than 50% of the population will be a visible majority. Since most immigrants to Canada are from Asia, academics have suggested that Canada is becoming an Asian country.

Much of this increase in population will also be non-Christian. While this trend in demographics has been ongoing for some time, these recent statistics have raised awareness among Canadian policy makers, and politicians, that both institutional changes, combined with attitudinal changes, must be more systematic if Canada is to take full advantage of our immigrant skills.

Now, let's compare our two countries. In the United States, Asians don't represent as significant a percentage of the residents as in Canada. According to your 2000 Census, Asian Americans represented 4.2% of your total population. (11.9 million people, U.S. Immigration Statistics).

What happens when there is an increase in immigration from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, in a country with a small population like Canada? Racism remains a perennial obstacle to integration, despite the fact that Canadians have shown that we can be welcoming of immigrants, displaying great compassion and tolerance, and when most Canadians consistently support the goals of multiculturalism. However, media responses reflect some ambivalence about changes in Canadian society and culture.

Since September 11, 2001, immigration from Asia is again viewed with a great deal of ambivalence, especially from Muslim countries. It seems to be a misconception that Muslims come from the Middle East; in fact, the country with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia.

In my role as a Senator, I reach out to all communities, and in response, I am welcomed by them. I am asked to speak to many diverse groups across Canada – such as the I-Star Awards for Ismaili youth, the Tamil Congress, Jewish community groups, the Filipino community, the Canadian clubs and the Rotary Clubs in different cities, immigrant and youth groups, and of course, the many Chinese Canadian groups. One of my goals is to help mainstream society and new Canadians to achieve better mutual understanding of each other.

In 2001, I proposed a Motion in the Senate for the federal government to recognize May as Asian Heritage Month, and this was passed unanimously before we recessed for Christmas. Now, you must think we are pretty backward in Canada because the same has been recognized in the US since the term of Jimmy Carter's presidency.

Asian Heritage Month has been celebrated by Canadians across the country since 1993 at the grassroots level, but there was no federal recognition until the motion was passed at the end of 2001. Now, it is on the official website of Canadian Heritage, as well as on the federal government calendar. The celebrations are well received and growing each year with more and more cities joining in. This year, there are 12 cities celebrating, from Victoria to Fredericton. I am invited to participate in these celebrations in most cities during the month of May. I believe it is important that all Canadians share in each other's cultures, and May is designated the month when everyone has a chance to learn about Asian Canadian contributions to

Canada; it is also an opportunity to promote Asian Canadian artists and authors.

The reason I want to talk about the sharing of cultures is that it has become even more important since Sept. 11th. Rohinton Mistry, the award winning author from Toronto, discovered the effect of the tragedy when he and his wife went on a book tour in the United States in 2002. He ended up canceling the tour after repeatedly being singled out for special security checks. These happened at every single airport. His publisher issued a statement that, “As a person of colour, Mistry was stopped repeatedly and rudely at each airport along the way – to the point where the humiliation had become unbearable”. Incidentally, Rohinton Mistry, as many of you are aware, is a rather pale, soft spoken, Parsi gentleman, who was born in Bombay; so the question becomes, if a renowned author is treated in this manner, how are many anonymous travelers treated daily?

A South Asian Canadian Senator said her husband was pulled aside and subjected to intense questioning at one of the airports even though he was traveling with her, and he also had a special passport. When she raised the question as to why, she was told he looked like a terrorist!

For those who have always opposed the trend towards increased immigration, (since few of European heritage are immigrating to Canada), the current uncertainty is an opportunity to attack our liberal value of immigration as a benefit to Canadians. Security can always be used as an excuse for harassment. For these individuals, there may be a fear that the increasing numbers of Canadians of Asian heritage might force them to change their idea about what Canadians look like, and who Canadians are.

Like in most developed countries, Canada’s birth rate has declined by 25% over the last decade. It is now below the replacement level of 1.5 children per family. Immigration is our primary source of labour. While I’m not an expert on immigration, I am one of probably very few Senators who take it on as one of my major focuses in my work. My approach is not so much of pragmatism, because Canada needs labour, but humanitarian because immigrants are people who, at times, need a helping hand. My office deals with the Department of Immigration frequently, even though this is normally the duty of Members of Parliament.

I want to draw a further comparison between Canadian and U.S. immigration. Once immigrants arrive in Canada, the majority want to integrate into Canadian society and become citizens. A rather startling recent finding is that 84% of immigrants in Canada become Canadian citizens, compared to only 40 per cent in the U.S., and 75% in Australia.

A 2003 study by Statistics Canada concludes that the sense of belonging to Canada is greater than either religious or ethno-cultural attachments for both the majority and the minority groups. So, it is clear that our multiculturalism policy works because it tends towards integration rather than fragmentation.

However, it is difficult for many new Canadians to find jobs that match their skills, experience and education, even though our immigrants are better educated than the Canadian norm. It is estimated that billions are being lost to the Canadian economy as a result of this waste of valuable resources. For individuals with Ph.D.s and many years of work experience, arrival in Canada can be a devastating shock as they languish in jobs as taxi drivers, cleaners, and retail workers. Our federal government has recognized this problem, and is working with their provincial counterparts, and the governing bodies of the various professions, eg. the College of Physicians and Surgeons, to solve it.

An article in the Toronto Star on our changing demographics, headlined “Rainbow ends at glass ceiling,” notes that although Toronto has changed, its institutions have not. The situation is not one of fragmentation in communities but stratification by class. Toronto may make room for people of colour, but it has not yet invited them to take a seat at the head of the table. Senior management, professional positions, boards, media, and politics remain dominated by white males.

Statistics bear this out. The hardest hit are visible minority women who are confronted by discrimination on both race and gender. One of the immigrant Chinese women I interviewed for my dissertation, who was a well qualified graduate of Canadian universities, told me that a Caucasian woman, who knew far less than she did, was made her boss, claiming all her successes, but anything negative was blamed on her. So she changed companies and became the most successful person in the investment field in Toronto.

As a public person, I have not only spoken out in regard to the inequality in the Public Service, I have also been asked by the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) to help in mentoring new immigrants, so last year, I became one of the first group of “Champions.” This same group is also identifying individuals willing to serve on boards of public institutions, and I am helping them get names of good candidates.

I am but one of many Canadians who are working towards the same goal. I believe that those who have been given the chance should pave the way for others to follow. I am doing this both as a Senator in our federal government and as the Chancellor of the University of Toronto.

I believe Canada will become a country where the term visible minority becomes irrelevant as immigration and intermarriage create a new Canada, with our future as global citizens. I see this happening with our grandchildren, who are of mixed cultures, and who embrace different languages, and traditions, effortlessly. So, when they are a little older, and when they are asked, “Where are you really from?” They will say, “Canada.” Of course.

Thank you again for inviting me.