

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

### **Canada's Changing Identity From Bicultural to Multicultural**

**The Women's Canadian Club of Toronto  
May 10, 2006**

Members of the Women's Canadian Club of Toronto, ladies & gentlemen:

First of all, I wish to thank Mona Shaw for inviting me to speak today. I believe it is timely for me to speak on Canada's changing identity, since there has been a lot of talk about multiculturalism issues lately, not only in Canada but also in Europe. As an ardent Canadian of Chinese heritage who has been in this country for almost 50 years, I am going to give you my personal view of Canadian identity, and how best our society should move forward.

I came to Canada on a student visa with no intention of staying, but fate had different plans for me. I married a Canadian when I graduated with my bachelor degree from McGill, and have been here ever since.

As a child in Hong Kong, I used to dislike the lack of change in the weather. So, I have chosen the right country to live in. I love the four distinct seasons and look forward to each one with great anticipation. Yes, I even love the snow, and in fact, every winter, we always go up north to get to the snow-belt. I must say, I couldn't have chosen a better country to call my own, and I am very proud to be a Canadian.

The first few years I spent in Canada, I lived in Montreal, and that was where I gained the sense of the bi-cultural nature of Canada. Montreal was more than bi-cultural, it was a divided city. My husband and I moved to Toronto in 1967, and were fortunate to escape the FLQ crisis.

Historically, the concept of biculturalism in Canada began in 1774, when the British authorities allowed the French Canadians full use of their language and system of civil law, and gave freedom to the Roman Catholic church, which was a mainstay of their culture.

Even though in 1839, Lord Durham said in his report that French Canadians should be assimilated through the joining of Upper and Lower Canada into a single entity, the resistance from politicians such as Lafontaine ensured the distinctiveness of the French Canadian culture.

It is interesting to note that the term “biculturalism” was used as far back as 1929, by Graham Spry, in a speech to the Canadian Club of Quebec. For many years, this concept of biculturalism seemed to suffice, with the tacit cooperation of the church and the authorities. Then in the early 1960s, the Quiet Revolution began in earnest in Quebec, as people began to question the established order.

Many of you would remember the Royal Commission in the 1960s on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, appointed by Prime Minister Pearson, to examine the issue of Canadian identity. Its objective was really to dissipate Quebec’s sense of being an oppressed nation, and replace it with a new concept of two founding peoples. What came as a surprise during the hearings, was the popular demand for the cultural rights of minority groups in the country, who were of neither English nor French heritage.

Then on July 14, 1967, Charles de Gaulle made his infamous pronouncement in Montreal,

*Vive Montreal! Vive le Quebec libre!*

The forces for the disintegration of Canada found a leader in Rene Levesque, who issued *Option Quebec* in September, making a clear demand for Quebec independence.

In 1968, Pierre Trudeau became our Prime Minister. In the meantime, the reports from the Royal Commission, particularly the fourth report, entitled *The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups*, together with the Liberal government’s growing awareness of the increasing numerical strength of Canada’s population of neither French nor English origin, gave birth to the multiculturalism policy of 1971.

When Prime Minister Trudeau announced the implementation of the policy in the House of Commons in October, he said,

*A policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework commends to the government as the most suitable means of assuring the cultural*

*freedom of Canadians...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...*

So in 1971, Canada officially became a bilingual and multicultural country - the first multicultural country in the world.

Ever since the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, there had been an ideological impetus to liberalize our immigration laws, due to our interest in human rights, and Canada's involvement with the Commonwealth. However, racial bias remained in our immigration policy until the 1960s.

At that time, Canada was also suffering from a shortage of skilled and educated workers, so it became necessary to open our doors to more immigrants. In 1967, the points system was introduced, so that well qualified immigrants could enter Canada irrespective of their countries of origin. Since then, the diversity of our country has greatly increased, as I am sure you are aware, living in Toronto.

In fact, when you compare Canada in 1966 and in 2006, the first thing you would notice is the change in the makeup of the population. In other words, Canada has been transformed from a bicultural into a multicultural country. The Canadian population is now made up of millions of people from more than 200 different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. We have become so well known for our success in multicultural policy that Britain, in the 1990s, adopted it, and has been promoting the virtues of ethnic identities and diversity.

However, in the past year, events in France, Britain and Australia have made Canadian policy makers, as well as social commentators, wonder whether Canada is better off, and therefore immune to the violence rooted in ethnic divisions. No, we are not. However, with the political will of our government, and the determination of the Canadian people, there are solutions. I will come to them later.

It is interesting if we compare ourselves with Australia, which, in 1973, abandoned their white-Australia policy, and joined Canada as having the most aggressive per capita immigration targets in the world. Even though Australia has improved its international reputation for peaceful integration, the recent attack on people of Middle Eastern origins by some 5,000 white

Australian thugs on the beaches of Cronulla shocked the world. We need to ask ourselves, are Canadians better at promoting policies of integration? Can similar incidents happen here in Canada?

Now, what about Britain? From the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War to the beginning of the 1960s, Britain welcomed many immigrants from its former colonies. So, in a sense, Britain had opened its doors to people of very diverse ethnic origins twenty years before Canada. Many of us have heard of the race riots in south London, Birmingham and other cities. Seeing how well diversity was working in Canada, in the 1990s, Britain adopted a Canadian-style multiculturalism policy. But on July 7, 2005, the bombing in the heart of London by young Muslim men, who had grown up in Britain, and had been acculturated in the British way of life, not only shocked, but also mystified everyone.

Four months after the incidents in London, the outskirts of Paris erupted in violence. I won't go into the details of the incidents, but what was obvious was that these events were caused by the treatment of the immigrant population, and their native born children, by those of pure French blood. Entire neighbourhoods of the poor and alienated, protested their frustration and sense of isolation in wanton destruction.

What is the current situation in Canada? We have an ever-growing seniors' population, but many Canadians I have spoken to don't seem to realize how low our birthrate is – it is way below replacement rate. We need a working population to support our country, because within 5 years, the growth in our labour force will be entirely dependent on new Canadians. That is the reason why we need immigrants to fuel our economy.

Why don't we have more immigrants from Europe since the perception is that they assimilate better? The answer is that there aren't that many who wish to immigrate here because conditions are just fine at home. People only leave their own countries if they believe they can have a better life somewhere else.

Since Canada needs the “brightest and the best,” without any special designation as to ethnicity or country of origin, we have been welcoming a very well educated immigrant population; ironically, much better educated than the Canadian born population, and the majority of them in recent years come from Asia.

According to the Canadian Labour Congress Report in October, 2005, one in three visible minorities had a university degree as compared to one in five white Canadians. And among those who don't have a university degree, visible minorities have a smaller proportion with less than a high school education. Please note that these statistics include visible minorities born in Canada.

Census Canada projects that by 2017, 20% of the population of Canada will be comprised of visible minorities; in other words, people like me who don't look Caucasian. This includes those born in Canada, and those who have been in Canada for generations. It is projected that another 1 million will be born in Canada between 2006 & 2017. In certain suburbs of our major cities, such as Richmond in B.C., and Markham in Ontario, the percentage of the non-white population was already over 50% in our 2001 census.

In our major cities which are the economic engines of the country, such as Toronto and Vancouver, in 10 years time, the percentage of Canadians of non-European heritage will be more than 50%, and so they will be actually the majority in those cities. So, there is no other way to describe Canadian identity except that it is multicultural.

Does that mean we have an "identity crisis"? No, we don't. Canadians should realize that diversity is an advantage to Canada, and we should make use of it.

When we look at what happened in the suburb of Sydney, Australia, we immediately think of race riots in the U.S. It could never happen in Canada, could it? When you look back at Canadian history, yes, we did have race riots. We are certainly not immune unless we learn to be welcoming of Canadians who don't look like us.

Going back to our comparisons with countries like Britain and France, the perpetrators of violence are the locally born off springs of immigrant parents. These are members of the underclass, acculturated and with all the language skills, but who are isolated and poor because they have not been given equal opportunities in the countries their parents adopted.

The feelings of this second generation are poignantly expressed by a young man in an article in *Time* magazine, entitled “*How much more French can I be*” He wrote:

“I was born and raised in France. I’ve been a citizen since birth. How much more French can I be? .... it’s time for minorities to reject the cult of victimization....there are a lot of problems. Those problems exploded last week, unleashing the long-held resentment of people who feel unwanted, scorned and swept into the margins like so much trash. To change that, the gap between the banlieue (suburb) and the rest of France must be bridged. We need to make peace with the things that make us different. I’m French, I’m Muslim, and there are millions like me. We live here, and we are not going anywhere. So let’s start getting used to it.”

We, in Canada, have come to realize that visible minorities born in Canada are having a similar experience. A report done by the Canadian Labour Congress last year found that native-born Canadians who are not of European heritage are earning \$8,000 less than Canadians of European heritage. We are talking about Canadians who have the same education, experience and language skills; the only difference is the colour of their skin. Does that sound familiar to the situation in France? This is not acceptable in an equitable society like Canada. Something must be done, since we are all responsible for this situation.

In the case of new Canadians, our immigration department is bringing into Canada the “best and the brightest,” and once they are here, they can’t find jobs that are commensurate to their education, work experience and skills. Those who have opportunities offered elsewhere will leave, and many to the U.S. because it is easier to get recognition of foreign credentials there. Statistic Canada tells us that between 1980 & 2000, 40% of our skilled workers and business immigrants left Canada within 10 years after arrival. What a terrible loss to Canada!

I am sure you have come across stories in the press about PhDs driving cabs or working as cleaners of buildings, and deans of medical schools not being allowed to practice medicine while we are very short of doctors. Do you know that there are 10,000 medical personnel across Canada whose foreign credentials are not recognized by provincial licensing bodies? Think of the frustrations these new Canadians live with. Many stay because they want better opportunities for their children. Now, we are told

that the children are doing even worse than the parents!! Do you know that the Canadian economy is losing \$13 billion per annum from the under employment of our immigrants?

Are we immune to violence rooted in ethnic divisions? No, we are not, but it can be prevented, and the very first thing is to give all Canadians equal opportunity in employment. Our government has to take the lead. Despite the passage of the Multiculturalism Act (1985) and the various versions of the Equity Employment legislation, we are not seeing results because of a lack of will at the top, a lack of targets, timetables, and measurable results.

In March 2005, the Department of Canadian Heritage held a policy forum called “Canada 2017 – Serving Canada’s Multicultural Population for the Future.” Again, many problems were highlighted, and many good ideas offered, but we need to see rhetoric turned into action towards targeted results. We need political will at the different levels of government, and we, the Canadian people, can demand it through our democratic process.

At the same time, Canadians need to know that diversity is strength. Remember all the biases against immigrants in the past? The Irish and the Scots were described as “savages” without “common decency”, and as “uncivilized.”

After World War 2, because of Canada’s need for labour, and the United Nations calls to solve the refugee crisis for displaced persons in Europe, another wave of immigrants came to Canada, and these were the Eastern Europeans and the Jews. Canadians have learnt to accept them as a vibrant part of our country. They were not necessarily people with blond hair and blue eyes, and neither were they necessarily Christians. Some of them became our 2<sup>nd</sup> wave establishment, as compared to the original establishment of the Anglo Saxons. They include immigrants like Tom and Sonja Bata, Frank Stronach, Peter Munk and the Reichmann brothers. This group helped to break down the ingrained anti-semitic and anti-foreign barriers.

Now, Canada is experiencing another wave of immigrants who happen not to be of European heritage. They are also of non-Western cultures and religions. The majority are well educated, hard working and entrepreneurial. They should be welcomed with open arms as part of our diverse nation, because they are contributing to the future of Canada.

I believe the media plays an important role in setting the tone for the country. I am very perplexed whenever I see the pejorative term “hyphenated Canadian.” One day, I asked my seatmate in the Senate, Senator Marie Poulin, whether she has ever been called a “hyphenated Canadian” since she is a proud French Canadian. She said she had never heard the term before. So, if French Canadians are not “hyphenated Canadians,” no one else is, no matter what their heritage.

Another thing we hear often in the media is that visible minorities are not easily assimilated. If you close your eyes, you will know that that’s not true. The only difference is that they can’t change the way they look. To give an example, because of the way I look, a translator in the Senate insisted that my English accent was not understandable. If that were true, I wouldn’t be invited to stand here and speak to you today.

There are many stories about 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup> generation Canadians who are visible minorities who have been told to learn English, even though their English is a hundred times better than their rude accusers.

We also hear complaints about visible minorities who hold on to their heritage. I am very proud of my heritage, but it doesn’t make me less loyal as a Canadian. I have never heard of anyone complaining about the English being proud of their heritage, or the French of theirs. So why should it be different for others? From my own experience, those who have pride in their heritage have much fewer problems in their personal life and in their work, than those who wish to be what they are not.

A new 10-year, 13 country, study found that immigrant youths who remain attached to their ethnic cultures do better on several fronts when compared with those who try to assimilate: they have more self esteem, experience less depression and anxiety, are better able to handle discrimination, feel they do better at school, and get along better in the community. Those who fared best were the immigrant youth who expressed an attachment to both their ethnic cultures and their national cultures.

Prof. John Berry, professor of psychology of Queen’s University, who was the lead author of the international report, said that:

The big surprise is that youth don’t do so well, psychologically or socially, if they try to assimilate.”

He continued to say that:

...the conventional wisdom that kids are probably just going to be absorbed in, and be assimilated into, the larger society and forget their cultural heritage, (is) just not the case in our study.

The most common and preferred way is the double-integrationist way of living, where they have competence in, know the language of, and have friends in both and identify in both,.....Surprisingly, the least preferred way is the assimilated way, where they turn their backs on their heritage culture.

He continued by saying that:

In societies built upon immigration, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the U.S., the kids have figured out that they don't have to choose, they don't have to be one or the other, they can be both.

Getting the kids to be involved in both cultures will depend, he said: on the way they are treated ...by the larger society.

So, this report proves my point even though, to me, it is just common sense. Professor Berry seems to have described a person like me, because I am bicultural from the opposite side of the world, and proud of it. I have found it to be extremely useful in my work as a Senator, and as the Chancellor of the University of Toronto.

The fact that Canada has a growing number of multicultural citizens spanning the globe is a bonus, particularly in trade and technology. With our economic future pointing to the Asia Pacific region, the Canadian government would be foolish not to take advantage of our very talented human resources.

I am surprised that this is not often on the agenda of the Canadian media. For example, Margaret Wente, a columnist in the *Globe & Mail*, editorialized: "I'm all for multiculturalism ---up to a point."

The same article mentioned the new regulation of the Dutch government, requiring would-be immigrants, (excluding those from the European Union and North America) to watch a video about life in the Netherlands, which included a topless woman and two men kissing. This was aimed at discouraging potential Muslim immigrants. The infamous Danish cartoon was also alluded to. The author concluded:

Wente concluded, “In Canada, we can afford to cling to our multiculturalism illusions.....But, secretly, we don’t really believe that differences are okay.”

What all that meant was that there was a limit to Ms. Wente’s respect for others. Unfortunately, she extended her personal belief by using the word “we”, meaning Canadians in general. Canada will no longer be the Canada most of us know if we should ever return to our racist past.

Personally, I believe if I can respect your nudity and homosexuality, you should also be able to respect my wanting to cover myself up. Respect for others who are not like us is the basis of a peaceful society.

Despite a lot of the bad news stories about visible minorities in the media, particularly lately in Toronto, we do occasionally hear of a good, positive story, such as Peter Newman’s “Third Wave Revolution,” in Maclean’s about the new establishment that is taking root in Canadian society.

A good example is Baljit Singh Chadha, who is called “the nut king of Montreal.” He was appointed to the Privy Council by Prime Minister Jean Chretien as one of the five members of the Ottawa-based security Intelligence Review Committee.

Another good example is Michael Lee-Chin of Chinese-Jamaican heritage, Chairman of AIC, who donated \$30 million towards ROM’s expansion. Also a good example is vegetarian-foods entrepreneur Shreyas Ajmera, who recently donated \$5 million to the same cause. This is just to mention a few members of the visible minority immigrant communities who have become our new establishment. Please note that these immigrants not only contribute greatly to Canadian society, they see Canadian cultural institutions as belonging to everyone. They are very much a part of the Canadian fabric.

Remember I mentioned that diversity is an advantage to Canada? I will give you an example. I travel a great deal, especially to Asia. For those of you who are not acquainted with the society in Hong Kong, I am going to describe the business environment as a way of explaining how well diversity works there, even though I am only describing a segment of society. You see people of all backgrounds and cultures talking in different languages, mainly

in Cantonese, Mandarin and English. Many south Asians as well as Europeans speak Chinese dialects fluently. It is not unusual to also hear French, Dutch and German being spoken, all within a very few days. There are people from the Indian sub-continent, Middle East, Europe or East Asia, and they all seem to understand each other. They are the people who drive the economy of Hong Kong, making it one of the most important financial centres of the world.

I am thinking to myself, this is what Canadian cities should be like – dynamic, wealthy, world cities, where languages flow back and forth while citizens go about doing important things in building a successful country. We need to move beyond race and ethnicity; beyond language barriers; we need to respect each other's points of view; we need to welcome peoples from different parts of the world simply because they are good for our country. This positive outlook will help Canada to evolve from a multicultural society to an international society, where our citizens can contribute fully to our prosperity as a nation. I maintain that diversity is our greatest strength.