

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

“Our Journey: Opportunities, Challenges, and Achievements”

**In celebration of the UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial
Discrimination**

**Advisory Committee on Visible Minorities (ACVM)
Justice Canada**

March 21, 2006

Ladies & gentlemen:

It's a pleasure for me to be here today, and I would like to thank the Advisory Committee on Visible Minorities (ACVM) of Justice Canada for the invitation to be part of this distinguished panel.

Today, I will share with you my thoughts on the progress of Employment Equity in the Senate, in the Public Service, and in the broader community. Like you, I believe this is a journey, and our challenge should be viewed as an opportunity.

Looking at the Senate Administration, which voluntarily adopted an Employment Equity policy in the year 2000, the progress was dismal with visible minorities representing only 6.8% of the entire staff as of 2004, and the majority employed in the operational category (blue collar). In 2006, the majority is still employed in the operational category, but the number of visible minorities has increased to 9.5%. The hopeful signs are the increasing presence of this group within the professional category (7.46%), and a new training program to feed visible minorities into middle management. There are still no visible minorities in the middle and senior management currently, and without change at the top, we can't be assured of a real commitment to change.

Over a year ago, I helped a young Canadian law graduate of Korean descent I met at Ottawa University gain the opportunity to work in the Senate law office. When the Senate Law Clerk met her, he was so impressed he hired her even though she had yet to do her articling. She was the only non-white person in that office! She enjoyed her experience there, and has since left to do her articling.

When I was appointed to the Senate 8 years ago, as the first senator of Asian descent, I was indeed a rarity on the Hill. Coming from a city like Toronto, I could have been in a different country. It was even difficult to find any staff who were visible minorities.

While I would say my own appointment to the Senate was progress, the number of visible minority appointments has not increased much, and it looks like the Senate is failing to fulfill its constitutional role of representing minorities in Canada. This makes our task of getting the word out about equity that much more difficult.

Many of you would have read what Minister Michael Chong said, coming from Bay Street, about the lack of diversity in Ottawa. He was quoted as saying, “I was shocked to see the absence in the House of Commons staff and in the public service.” One option that has been proposed by the People’s Forum, which met with Parliamentarians last November, is a non-partisan, all-party caucus, to address these issues. As Parliament resumes sitting in April, we need to look at this again. Certainly, all political parties need to have definitive plans as to how they are going to expand the number of visible minorities on the Hill, and in the public service.

As some of you may know, the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, of which I am a member, has been looking at the issue of employment equity in the Public Service, and both Maria Barrados and Alex Himelfarb have appeared before the Committee. This study, and the honesty and transparency with which these individuals have approached the Committee, have been heartening. So finally, after so many years since the first affirmative action took place in 1978, and the passage of the subsequent Employment Equity Acts (1986, 1995), we are beginning to take employment equity seriously in our public service.

The importance of the public service in advancing the cause of employment equity cannot be overstated. After all, the public service – to use the business terminology – has a clientele, and its clientele is increasingly diverse. As the diversity of our citizens steadily increases, and the public service visible minority numbers remain stagnant, it resembles an elite here in Ottawa that does not reflect those it purports to serve throughout the varied regions of Canada.

Without a doubt, the sense of alienation I frequently encounter in the different regions of Canada, and the general sense of hostility towards Ottawa, is not just directed towards the members of Parliament. It is also directed towards the public service which seems remote, and removed, from people's lives. If we are to have engaged citizens – who support the Government of Canada – we must strive to narrow the gap between the Government and its citizens.

Besides representation of its citizens, why is it important to have diversity in our public service? Because it is good business and the public service needs to focus on our new markets. You would remember that former Prime Minister, Paul Martin, spoke of the importance of engaging with the growing economies of India and China in a major address before senior public servants last year. He emphasized that Parliament needed to steer the international course for Canada. We all know that in the new Conservative government, David Emerson was given the portfolio of Minister of the Pacific Gateway, focusing on expanding trade with the Asia Pacific region.

What does this mean for the public service in practical terms? Well, it should be a clear sign that we need to start recruiting and promoting people whose education, language skills, and cultural background, are best suited to work in advancing Canada's interests in this region. That's what many Canadian corporations are doing.

An example is Scotiabank, which recently promoted Ajay Mundkur as vice-president for Asia-Pacific retail banking in their India head office. With years of experience in Canada, he was seen as the best person to break into the Indian market because of his knowledge of local culture, conditions, and business practices, combined with his training at Scotiabank in Canada. Locals interviewed as to whether it mattered that Mundkur was from India stated clearly, "yes, it does make a difference that he's from here." "He's going to be able to get things done here far more easily than non-Indians would."

Gordon Nixon, President and CEO of RBC Financial Group, reported that 23% of RBC's staff and about 10% of its executive management team, as of October, 2005, were categorized as visible minority. Imagine that – RBC has managed to hire almost double the labour force representation of visible minorities. As a highly profitable business, the banks aren't doing

this out of charity or compassion – they are doing it because it makes good business sense. They are also hiring visible minorities because these individuals are good at their jobs. So, the merit principle is alive and well in the private sector.

According to the President of AIC, a mutual fund giant owned by the Canadian entrepreneur of Chinese and Jamaican descent, Michael Lee-Chin, “diversity pays”. He continues, “Canadian companies would be suicidal to ignore visible minorities.” With more than 40% of his staff being foreign born, Lee-Chin reaches a wide range of ethnic markets, and benefits from it.

The business case for hiring more visible minorities was clearly made and supported by a report from the Conference Board of Canada entitled “Making a visible difference: the contribution of visible minorities to Canadian Economic Growth” published in April, 2004. Both the public and private sector participated actively in supporting this study, which in May, 2005, produced an Employer’s Guide to Maximizing the Talents of Visible Minorities. I am sure you are aware of it since so many Government departments were supportive of this initiative. As you know, my colleague, Senator Oliver is its champion, and for this I salute him.

Canadians are aware that our future population growth as a nation will be dependant on immigrants, and due to our aging population, new Canadians now make up about 70% of the growth in the Canadian labour force, and by 2011, they will account for all of it. By 2017, visible minorities as a percentage of the entire Canadian population will grow to 20%, while in cities such as Toronto and Vancouver, this proportion is likely to be around 50%. Being from Toronto, I already know that my home city is the most multicultural city in the world, surpassing New York and London. This is my idea of a world city.

Despite what I’ve said about the demographic trends, it is troubling to know that there is a large wage gap between Canadians who are visible minorities and those of European heritage - 14.5% below the Canadian average as of the year 2000, according to the Conference Board of Canada. The largest number of our immigrants are from countries such as China and India, and they are in the economic category; that means we have a tremendous resource both in human potential, and for building Asia Pacific trade with the fastest growing, and, soon to be, the largest economies of the world. We would be foolish to let our opportunities slip away.

Why the gap in wages in general? Why the lack of promotion? Why underemployment at all levels? Well, according to a report commissioned recently by the Canadian Labour Congress (Oct. 2005), the answer is systemic racism, pure and simple.

What is even more troubling, according to the report entitled “Racial Status and Employment Outcomes,” the average annual earnings for native-born visible minorities (\$21,983 in 2000) lags more than \$3,000 behind earnings for immigrant visible minorities, and \$8,000 behind earnings for Canadian-born whites. As the author of the study, Lesley Cheung, pointed out in an interview, it’s not about language or education, since Canadian born visible minorities are receiving the same education and language training as all the others. The only variable remaining is discrimination against those who are not of European heritage.

What can you do when you can’t change the way you look? I believe the process of changing the minds and hearts of others, starts with those of us who are visible minorities. First, we must have confidence in ourselves and in our heritage. I have often been asked to speak to students of many different backgrounds. I tell them that they are Canadians first and foremost, no matter what they may encounter in their everyday lives. We may all look different, but we are the Canadians of the 21st century.

I will tell you a personal story of a translator in the Senate who used to harass my staff to get my speeches before they were delivered in the Chamber. The excuse was that she couldn’t understand my English because of my accent! Since my speeches are never given out beforehand, she not only didn’t get them, but a call from me to the Clerk’s office put an end to her harassment. So, the way you look has a strong influence on people’s perception of your ability.

The fact that I am a Canadian of Chinese heritage is a great source of pride to me. In January, I was one of four delegates representing Canada at the 14th Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum in Jakarta. Since I look Asian, everyone I encountered thought that I was a delegate from an Asian country, and I must say, I was very proud in telling them that I was a Canadian delegate.

We often hear of opposition to employment equity because it means unqualified people will get jobs. It doesn’t make any sense that white

people advance because of merit, while visible minorities only advance because of special treatment. As the study by the Canadian Labour Congress makes clear, employment equity has nothing to do with playing favourites. With classrooms as diverse as they are today, visible minorities are in every classroom. At the University of Toronto, 55% of the student body is made of visible minorities.

The Conference Board of Canada initiative points to a growing awareness by Canadian business that something needs to be done about the underemployment of visible minorities. Not necessarily because it's the right thing to do, but because it's the smart thing to do. Do you know that if all new Canadians were fully employed at their level of education, earning equal pay to a person of European heritage born in Canada, the contribution to Canada's economy would be an increase in personal income in the neighbourhood of \$13 billion a year? Can you imagine how much our economy has lost annually from these consumers of goods and services?

Frankly, there is urgency to dealing with this issue, not only for the sake of the Canadian economy, but also because we are losing a lot of our talent to other jurisdictions. Statistics Canada published its report earlier this month on the emigration of our immigrants between 1980 and 2000, and the figures are startling. 4 out of 10 – or nearly half – of all skilled workers and business immigrants left Canada within 10 years after arrival, mainly from source countries like the U.S. and Hong Kong. These are the people Canada needs. I know for a fact that many of those who came from Hong Kong during the 1980s and 1990s, with a good education and business experience, have returned to Hong Kong or other parts of Asia because the opportunities are greater there.

At the moment, there are 250,000 Canadians who are residents of Hong Kong. In the history of human migration, people have always gone where there were better opportunities. We need to give our immigrants and their children opportunities and reasons to stay in Canada.

Here is a classic story of a Sikh immigrant Gian Sangha, who came to Canada with fluency in four languages, two postgraduate degrees, including a PhD from Germany in environmental science. He has co-written two books, and authored numerous research papers at India's Punjab University.

Unable to find work, he removed his turban, and cut his hair to look more Canadian. Applying for a job as a regulatory officer at the MacKenzie Valley Land and Water Board, and scoring among the highest of the 12 applicants, he was rejected because he was overqualified. Appealing to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, he received \$9,500 for discrimination, as the Board ruled in his favour. However, he was not hired. Dr. Sangha faces the typical Canadian Catch 22 – if he applies for jobs at his level of experience, he is rejected because he has no Canadian experience, but when he tries to get Canadian experience, at lower-level jobs, he is rejected because he is overqualified. The Canadian government didn't pay for his education, so isn't it a crime not to make use of talents like his that come to us free of charge?

As mentioned before, visible minorities born in Canada are even worse off in pay equity than visible minority immigrants. This to me is an urgent matter for our government. As we are all aware from what happened in Paris and in London, Canada is not immune. If we don't give everyone an equal opportunity in our society, we will create an underclass that will sooner or later explode. Besides, it is important for Canada to live up to its reputation for upholding human rights.

How are we going to overcome the inequities facing visible minorities? It is the CEOs, the Presidents, the Ministers and Deputy Ministers, who need to take a stand, and set the tone. The culture of any organization needs to be established at the top. Objectives must be set, and management performance must be assessed. At the University of Toronto, an important measure for the performance appraisal of professional and managerial staff is their "sensitivity to diversity competency" metric, making equity, diversity and inclusiveness a lived mandate and not just a policy for the University.

I'm not saying that it will be an easy transition for any organization. It won't. It is not easy for people to be empathetic and understand each other's ways of looking at the world. It is a challenge, but it is a challenge we need to embrace because diversity is a huge advantage when it is integrated throughout an organization.

Embracing Change, which our eminent panelist Errol Mendes and my good friend Bev Nann have been so actively involved in, has played an important role in influencing diversity across the public service. I would like

to take this opportunity to congratulate Errol Mendes for being appointed as Senior Advisor on Diversity to the Privy Council Office in September, 2005, filling a gap left by my other good friend Nurjehan Mawani, who left the public service for a very challenging position with the Aga Khan Development Network.

A recent report by the Public Service Management Agency notes that while the situation for visible minorities has improved over the last few years, with visible minorities making up 8% of the total public service, this figure is not in keeping with the labour market availability of visible minorities which stands at 12.6% of the workforce. At the same time, hiring, retentions, and promotions are not keeping up with the recommended target of Embracing Change of 1 in 5.

The representation of visible minorities in the Department of Justice has gone from 6.7% in September 2000 to 10.3% in December 2005. This exceeds departmental workforce availability of 7.9%. Gaps have significantly narrowed in all occupational categories. Congratulations! Clearly, the Justice Department has a handle on this issue, and is doing better than the public service as a whole.

There are visionary community activists and business people who understand the link between productivity and embracing diversity. Tired of waiting for rhetoric regarding employment equity to have some impact on reality, they are coming together to form coalitions to make it work. One example is The Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) initiative started by the Maytree Foundation, and chaired by Dominic D'Alessandro and Diane Bean of Manulife Financial. I was involved as a mentor in the past year. Through it, mentors help immigrants break into the Canadian market by teaching them the skills they need, and helping them to develop essential networks to work in the fields they are trained in. There is a similar program in Ottawa for immigrant women at the Ottawa-Carleton Immigrant Service Centre (OCISO).

Then there is Career Bridge, Chaired by Tim Penner of Procter & Gamble, which is another initiative spearheaded by the Maytree Foundation, offering paid internships for qualified recent immigrants who are pre-screened for language and education, have at least a Bachelor's degree, a minimum of 3 years international work experience, and are new arrivals in Canada.

This is not to say that Canadian corporations have caught the wave – very few directors of Canadian boards are visible minorities and executive positions are still dominated by white males.

The Employment Equity Act is merely a tool; what is required is a change in institutional culture – a fundamental change in attitude, and that is always a challenge. At the same time, visible minorities must work together to help each other. Internal divisions between different ethnic groupings won't help advance the cause.

One can readily make the comparison between employment equity for visible minorities with the women's movement, where attitudes have evolved, but slowly, and with great difficulty. All the women in this room know that there are still those who steadfastly hang on to attitudes from the 1950s. Remember 30 years ago, women despaired of reaching senior executive positions, but our status in society has changed radically over the intervening years. And, if we do the right thing, I expect that over the next 5 to 10 years, we will reach the same status for visible minorities.

For those of us in positions to help, we must serve as role models and mentors. Our presence can signal cultural change in Canadian society. Employment equity is a necessity if the public service is going to continue to represent a diverse Canadian population in a meaningful way. The only way to do this is to be open to the diversity of ideas, and be creative in hiring our bright and qualified visible minority population. This is a great opportunity for renewal, and visible minorities will start seeing the public service as the place to work and a place they can fulfill their ambitions, thereby reflecting the diversity of the Canadian population it serves.