

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Who's a Canadian?

University College of the University of Toronto "Asian cultures in Canada Class"

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I wish to thank Prof. Mehta for inviting me to speak to you today. As you can see, I will not be speaking on Asian Canadian cultures, but on a much broader topic.

Have any of you ever had the experience of a stranger coming up to you in a public place and asking you where you are from? And what is your nationality? I bet this situation is familiar to many of you, who are not Caucasians. It happens to me all the time. When I say I'm from Canada, and I'm a Canadian, then the next question is, "Where are you really from?"

Sometimes, total strangers will say a few words in Chinese or Japanese to me, usually in a heavy English accent, thinking that they are being nice to someone just off the boat, and presuming that I would naturally understand. No wonder we hear second, third, or even fourth generation Asian Canadians, being asked whether they can speak English. So it didn't surprise me when Joy Kogawa, who was born in Canada, wrote that her son's friend asked whether our very accomplished Canadian author could "speak English!"

When I went on a government mission with 3 other senators to attend the 14th Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum in Jakarta in February 2006, being an Asian woman, I was presumed to be staff from an Asian country. I noted that there were very few delegates who were women, and among all the non-Asian countries around the Pacific Rim - Chile, U.S., Australia, New Zealand and Russia, I was the only ethnic Asian delegate. This speaks a lot about Canada as a nation. When I spoke in the Forum, with the maple leaf flag on the table, as well as when I negotiated policies on behalf of Canada, I took particular pride in representing my country.

So, who's a Canadian? What do Canadians look like? And, what is Canadian identity? I am going to explore these issues with you.

The simplest answer to the first question is that Canadians are those who are citizens and hold Canadian passports. But, I believe it goes much deeper than that. Canadians are those who have Canadian values - democracy, free speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of choice in their daily lives, in work, and in where they live. I will go further and be idealistic in saying that Canadians are those who uphold the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. And, in fact, most Canadians fully support the Charter, with three quarters saying they believe their rights are better protected under the Charter. Multiculturalism and bilingualism, the cornerstones of our identity, as outlined in the Charter, are also widely accepted and embraced.

What do Canadians look like? Despite widespread support for our multicultural reality, there is still the perception that Canadians are Caucasians who only speak French or English or both. That was correct historically. However, today, we all know that the single and most outstanding influence on Canadian society is “immigration,” which fuels our population and our work force, because fewer Canadians are being born, and births are way below replacement rate. According to Statistics Canada, if current trends continue, by 2011, immigrants will account for all our net labour force growth.

In recent years, Canada has been admitting between 230,000 to 260,000 immigrants each year. What was thought of as the ideal target was 1 % of our population, but our immigration department has not been able to achieve that. Of the immigrants who come to Canada, the greatest number in recent years is from Asia, with China and India as lead source countries. Because of this trend, it is projected that by 2017, the visible minority population will account for 20% of the entire Canadian population. That percentage could very well be on the low side.

According to the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, Canadians of Asian origin, in 2001, already accounted for close to 10% of our entire population. This means that today Asian Canadians make up a significant proportion of our population.

Since I am speaking in a course called “Asian Cultures in Canada,” we should explore what Asians have in common, aside from the part of the world we, or our ancestors, came from. The geography of Asia includes East Asia, South East Asia, South Asia and Central Asia. People from these areas

have ancient civilizations and traditions, and many have written languages that date back thousands of years. Historically, we are also linked, not only by wars of conquests, but also by trade that started hundreds of years before Europeans began their trade routes to Asia. We also happen to share the common bond of being one of the most marginalized groups in Canadian history. But, today, Canadians of Asian heritage are becoming an increasingly important part of the Canadian cultural scene.

So, what do Canadians look like? They look like you and me. Our federal government is very slow to come to terms with this reality, as shown in the make-up of our federal public service. But, as Canadians, we know what our cities look like, particularly a city like Toronto which is a microcosm of the United Nations. Being from an international city like Hong Kong, I am particularly comfortable in Toronto where you hear many languages being spoken in public places, and where you can find restaurants serving foods from all over the world. Over the last 20 or so years, it is no longer necessary to go to certain parts of the world to purchase particular products because you can find almost everything in our major cities.

In Ottawa, where I spend a lot of my time, bilingual means French and English, and everything has to be in both official languages. Many immigrants and their children are multilingual, speaking our official languages, plus others. Some of our political leaders fail to realize what a bonus this is for Canada. Canadians today are diverse in appearance and speak a multitude of languages. Listening to the different languages being spoken is like being in a comfort zone for me. I would hope that more and more Canadians feel the same way I do.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, Canadian multiculturalism, a policy developed by our former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, of which we are very proud, has been under close scrutiny. The rhetoric has grown since the murders of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, the avid critic of Islam and the provocative Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn. Then a Danish cartoonist made fun of the prophet Mohammed and sparked riots all over the Muslim world. On July 7, 2005, suicide bombers attacked the London subway, and 3 months later, there were fire bombings on the outskirts of Paris.

While the above events were all over our media, sparking discussions about whether our policy of multiculturalism was the culprit, a group of Muslim youths were arrested in Toronto for plotting with explosives last

year. What do these events have to do with Asian culture in Canada? A lot. The rhetoric against immigrants and all those who look like immigrants affects us all, especially since the largest group of immigrants is from Asia. What is even more important, is the effects of these events on the children of immigrants, not only my own children, but also some of you here today.

There has been a multitude of articles written about how second generation visible minorities are feeling less Canadian than their immigrant parents. We need to identify the issues that are leading young people to feel alienated.

A number of years ago, our son, who was working at a major Canadian bank, told me that there was no point staying there because, as a visible minority, there was no chance for someone like him to get to the top of a Canadian corporation anyway. This came as a wake-up call to me. I realized that the younger generation has expectations from this country, and why not? After all, the second generation was born in Canada and is fluent in the official languages, and immersed in Canadian culture. The only difference is, like me, many of you don't look Caucasian. But, we are the Canadians of the 21st century.

Speaking about immigrants and their children, there are distinct differences between the situation in Continental Europe and Canada, but there are similarities between Britain and Canada, which adopted our multicultural policy in the 1990s.

In Continental Europe, the perpetrators were not immigrants but the children of "guest workers," men who were originally brought into the various European countries from the very poor rural areas of countries like Turkey and Morocco in the 1950s and '60s, due to labour shortages. They were "guest workers" who were supposed to leave when they were no longer needed, and they themselves believed that they would eventually return to their own countries. After living alone for a decade or more, they were allowed to bring their families, and with social assistance, life was certainly better than being back in their home countries. Their children went to school, and for many, it was not until the 1990s that they decided that they would stay for good. The renowned Dutch journalist and historian, Geert Mak, accused his government of willful blindness in the 1980s and '90s towards this segment of the population. These were the origins of the majority of the immigrant communities in Continental Europe in the 1990s.

Some comparison can be drawn between these migrant workers and the Chinese railway workers who were brought into Canada to build the CPR in the 19th century. After the CPR was completed, the Head Tax was imposed and eventually, Chinese Exclusion was enacted in 1923. When this was repealed in 1947, family reunification became possible. Those who immigrated to Canada since the late 1940s knew they were here to stay. That's where the comparison ends. In other words, even the group which suffered the most discrimination has a much longer history in Canada than the groups in Continental Europe.

Canada has always been an immigrant country, and therefore our situation here is quite different from European countries which do not welcome immigrants like we do. In Holland, *“a recent report commissioned by the immigration minister has found that the political climate of the past half decade and the escalating criticism of Muslims has generated a widespread sense of rejection and humiliation among the second-generation Moroccans who are the focus of it all.”*

In Canada, even though acts of racial discrimination are perpetrated in public places, and there is ugly graffiti against different groups, I note that the racial tension fanned by public personalities in Europe is not happening in Canada, and our politicians, in particular, are very careful in what they say and do in public, because they set the tone for our country.

What happened in Europe by a disgruntled few has marred the public perception of the entire immigrant population, and in particular, those of Muslim faith.

In Canada, there are those who have similar perceptions. They question why our federal government does not limit our immigration source countries to Europe and other Western countries like the U.S., Australia and New Zealand? In other words, why not bring back the “white Canada” policy that existed before 1967? Well, it wouldn't work because people only emigrate to have a better life, and the majority of the populations in these countries are doing just fine where they are.

As I mentioned earlier, Canada needs immigrants to fuel our population and our labour force, and we are bringing in the best and the brightest in the world in the economic category, many of whom just happen

not to be white. I believe our government must move forward and use the talents we have in Canada - both in the name of social justice, and for the good of the Canadian economy.

A lot has been said about the need for our different levels of government to have concrete plans to help new Canadians to make use of the education, skills and talents that they come to Canada with. It is therefore good news that the Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act was passed by the Ontario legislature just before Christmas and that the Ontario government is funding a major “Hire an Immigrant” campaign with commercials and a dedicated website. But that only applies to Ontario. A lot more needs to be done across Canada. Not getting jobs that are commensurate with their training can lead to social isolation, poverty, and alienation for our immigrants, and undermines the goal of integration. And, social cohesion cannot happen without economic integration.

Immigrants need to integrate into Canadian society. For me, social integration means accepting Canadian values such as respect for our rule of law, and the values expressed in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, learning about Canadian history and enjoying what is dear to all Canadians. A love of our unique geography comes to mind. After all, isn't that the meaningful way of adopting a country? When children are adopted into a family, they absorb the values and teachings of that family, and there is no difference when we become citizens in an adopted country. To continue the same analogy, adoptive parents are most effective if they understand the cultural backgrounds of their adopted children. This dialogue has to go both ways. As a country, we have things to learn from our immigrant communities, and must take pride in our diversity. Mainstream society needs to listen to and accommodate newcomers. I have to admit that this is not always easy.

Speaking about integration, I'd like to discuss the situation in Britain. For a period after the 2nd World War, Britain was welcoming immigrants from the Commonwealth countries. Over the years, Britain society became very culturally diverse, much earlier than Canada. In the 1990s, Britain adopted our multicultural policy because it was deemed to be working so well. Then, on July 7, 2005, suicide bombers attacked the subway in London. The perpetrators were children of immigrants who went to British schools, spoke English fluently, and were totally acculturated in the British way of life. The question was, why?

When I was in England with my husband last October, there were many programmes on television on multiculturalism, immigration, integration, immigrant communities and faith schools. Some of these were phone-in shows, and it was enlightening to hear the different views on these topics in Britain.

The shock in Britain reverberated in Canada. And then last June, a group of young Muslims, with two older males, was arrested in Toronto for plotting with explosives made from fertilizers, against the Prime Minister and major Canadian landmarks. Now, please keep in mind that these charges are not proven. But, like the British, Canadians - many of them Muslims - wondered why?

In any group in society, there are always those who are law-abiding and there are the trouble makers. Do Canadians now have an identity crisis?

On December 8, 2006, in a controversial speech entitled “The Duty to Integrate: Shared British Values” Prime Minister Tony Blair made a speech on multiculturalism, which, according to Philip Johnston writing in the London Telegraph, “*overturned more than 3 decades of Labour support for the idea*” of multiculturalism. Cindi John, a reporter for the BBC News quoted Blair as saying that he never quite knew what people meant when they referred to “multiculturalism,” but a BBC poll showed that there was still a high level of acceptance for a multicultural Britain.

Is multiculturalism to blame, or is it the alienation of our immigrant communities, and of our youth? Or, as Tarek Fatah, one of the panelists at a University of Toronto event considering the links between terror and multiculturalism, said, “*It has nothing to do with youth. It is 90-year-old ugly men spouting hate against fellow Muslims who are driving this nonsense.*” I believe that, when individuals want to make trouble, it is so much easier to have a crutch, and throughout history, religion has been used as that crutch.

The term “multicultural” has been interpreted in different ways by different people. In the Canadian Oxford Dictionary, the word pertains to a society consisting of many culturally distinct groups, which was the correct way of describing Canada. Why do I say “was”? Because I believe Canada has moved on, and is now becoming an intercultural country.

Historically, Canada has experienced different waves of immigration: the French; the English; the Irish; the eastern Europeans; the Jews; and since the latter part of the 20th Century, the Asians. It wasn't until 1967 that the last racial bar was removed from our immigration policy. So, it was our government's intention to welcome immigrants from all over the world. The earlier waves of immigrants have integrated well into Canadian society, and now, it is up to the later immigrants to do the same.

I am often asked by groups of new Canadians, especially youth groups, and by the ethnic media, to give advice to new immigrants about integration into Canadian society. Besides learning about Canada and the Canadian way of life, and obeying our laws, I always encourage new Canadians to make friends with those not from their own backgrounds. I believe the best way to do that is to volunteer, not only among their own ethnic groups, but to volunteer in the communities where they can make friends with Canadians from other cultures. I realize this may be difficult for new arrivals, but once you have language skills, it becomes amazingly easy.

Canada has matured over the years, and our different levels of government have become comfortable in continuously welcoming immigrants into this country. This does not mean that we can sit back and not deal with problems that present themselves, but we are secure in knowing that we can solve them without over-reacting. This is in contrast to reactions in Europe which were criticized by the renowned Dutch journalist and historian, Geert Mak, who said "*... You don't solve a problem with hostility.*"

After the arrests of the group of Muslims in June, 2006, in the alleged bomb plot, Muslim leaders in Toronto met privately with Prime Minister Stephen Harper to discuss their concerns about an anti-Muslim backlash after the arrests. Muslims representing about 30 mosques in Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec also called for a zero-tolerance policy in mosques and community centres against preaching "any form of hatred or intolerance."

We must note that Canadian political leaders don't single out a small minority as the "other," as in Britain and in Italy, as in the case of the niqab worn by some Muslim women.

Canadians have a tendency to over compensate. A clear example is Christmas, which happens to be the tradition of the majority of Canadians. A number of years ago, the Christmas tree became the holiday tree, and even earlier, the greeting of “Merry Christmas” had become “Season’s Greetings.” Many of you may know that, recently, Christmas trees have been banned from some public buildings for fear that they might offend those who are not of Christian faith. I believe this has gone too far. After all, we are an inclusive country, and there is nothing better than celebrating each other’s beliefs and cultures.

Many of us say, “Happy Hanukkah,” “Gung Hei Fat Choy,” and “Eid Mubarak” and other greetings to our friends, so why not say “Merry Christmas?” Well, I like celebrating all traditions.

As the Chair of the New Canada Institute and co-author of *The Battle over Multiculturalism*, Andrew Cardozo, wrote, “*The way to celebrate in a diverse society is not to celebrate less, or celebrate generically, but rather to celebrate more, whatever the occasion.*”

We agree that we are different in Canada. Canadian school boards would not disallow the wearing of the hijab as in France; neither would our Foreign Minister ask Muslim women to remove the veils covering their faces when they go to see him in his office when there are also other women present. Our Prime Minister, no matter what political party he belongs to, would not say publicly that the niqab is a “mark of separation” that makes non-Muslims uncomfortable. Why is that? It is not because Canadians are necessarily nicer, but because Canadians are entrenched in our rights guaranteed by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as I mentioned earlier, and any violation can be challenged in our courts. Remember that a similar challenge against the RCMP was won by the Sikhs for the right to wear the turban while in uniform.

I’m not arguing that there hasn’t been a debate in Canada. While politicians, and lawyers, are very careful, the debate is ongoing in the media and among the public, about how much latitude should be permitted in the name of cultural diversity, and reasonable accommodation. We’ve had debates about Sharia Law in family mediation in Ontario, the role of private religious schools, the niqab in relation to women’s equality and Muslim prayer on university campuses. The list of potential issues is endless. And recently, there is the issue of the strange by-law enacted in Herouxville,

Quebec. As a result, there has been some erosion of support for multiculturalism since 2001. 60 percent of Canadians think multiculturalism helps foster people's Canadian identity and sense of citizenship – down from 80 percent in 2001, and fewer Canadians now believe that multiculturalism helps to foster common values.

As a society, we need to make the transition from multiculturalism to interculturalism, in policy and practice, where Canadians from many different ethnic backgrounds engage in dialogue and friendship. For that reason, in 2001, I proposed a motion, which was passed in the Senate, recognizing May as Asian Heritage Month in Canada. Since then, I have watched Asian Canadians from many different backgrounds, different faiths, of all ages, and all generations, come together to celebrate with mainstream Canadians, our unique Canadian experience, in cities across Canada. Our younger generation is already way ahead in creating our fusion cuisine, fusion art, fusion music, and our unique Canadian literature. This has been very gratifying to me to encourage friendships among different groups. As you must know, other groups also have their celebrations with the rest of the country, such as that of Black History Month.

Among the many different hats I wear, I am the patron of the Era 21 Networking Breakfast for Young Canadians on Parliament Hill, in celebration of Black History Month and Asian Heritage Month. This takes place every spring at the Parliamentary Restaurant for high school students in Ottawa. The participants are students from a multitude of ethnic backgrounds, who have a chance to mix with community leaders, as well as politicians. The keynote or panel speakers are their role models. This is one of the many venues to mentor and build friendships.

It is important to mention that the media has an important role to play in increasing understanding, and, thanks to the CBC, I think we are making headway in this area. While they have their faults, “Little Mosque on the Prairie,” and the mini series “Dragonboys,” are attempts by the media to open up the world of so-called ethnic Canadians to mainstream audiences. Interestingly, one of the people who vetted the script of “Dragonboys,” to make sure it wouldn't be offensive to Chinese Canadians, was Jim Wong Chu, one of the founders of Asian Heritage Month celebrations in Vancouver over ten years ago.

I strongly believe that all new immigrants need to understand that, with rights comes responsibility. There is a responsibility not only to obey Canadian law, but also to give back to Canadian society when we are able to do so. Some say that Canadians don't know how lucky we are until we've traveled outside of Canada, but I know that many of us do appreciate being Canadian.

Incidentally, the CBC News reported recently that Muslim Canadians have a greater satisfaction with their lives in Canada than non-Muslims. How interesting! For me, being Canadian is a privilege that I don't take for granted.

Does that mean I want to assimilate and forget my heritage? Absolutely not! I am very proud of the culture and traditions my ancestors handed down to me, and I am, at the same time, a loyal Canadian. I love learning everything about Canada, but I will not trade a civilization that has been around for thousands of years for one that was established in the last few hundred years. I would add the 2 together, which I hope makes me a more knowledgeable, interesting and better person.

So what is Canadian identity? The first thing that comes to mind is the Charter of Rights and Freedoms which guarantees equality for all Canadians - it is a useful tool for Canadians to uphold their rights in court.

I always talk about Canadian values when I'm abroad, and I have no doubt when I say that Canadians are global citizens who disseminate Canadian values all over the world. For example, a city like Hong Kong is home to a quarter of a million Canadians, and when there are demonstrations for democratic rights, my best source tells me that many Canadians take part. This, to me, is the best way for Canada to have a positive influence over our friends internationally.

One can't think of Canada without thinking of our beautiful National parks, our pristine forests and our lakes and rivers. Yes, we still have many of them and we better look after them. I identify very closely and psychologically, to the Canadian countryside, because to me, that represents Canada.

What of our oil, gas, lumber and other natural resources? Yes, Canada is synonymous with them, and we have to make sure we protect our

environment while we extract our natural resources. At the same time, it is necessary to build our renewable energy production.

A few years ago, my husband and I were fortunate to go on a visit with a few Senators to a diamond mining area in the northern part of the North West Territories, arranged by Senator Nick Sibbetson of the Dene tribe. What impressed me the most was the respect for the ecology of the area, enforced by the government, and carried out by the mining companies. The areas where there are lakes would have all the fish and other forms of life removed, and put into other lakes before the water is drained for mining. When the mines are exhausted, then the water and the fish will be put back. The local population is the beneficiary because the mining companies provide schools for the local children, as well as job training in the diamond industry.

How does one identify the Canadian people? We come in a pallet of skin colours; we have a choice of embracing the various cultures and traditions handed down to us from all over the world; we have the most varied tastes in our foods, and there is also that strange mixture called fusion cuisine which I mentioned earlier, meaning a mixture of the best of East and West and everything in between; and we speak more than 100 languages besides English and French, and, most important of all, we are all Canadians with common goals and aspirations.

I am going to tell you an anecdote that just happened a few weeks ago. I was travelling with my husband in the outback of Australia. During our stay in Alice Springs, I had signed up for an early morning balloon ride. The few of us were picked up at 4 AM from our various hotels, in total darkness, and we were driven to an area suitable for the balloon to take off. I was sitting near the front of the bus, and heard a young girl behind saying that she was freezing cold, and she didn't bring any jacket because, apparently, her Dad said she would be too hot! She was in shorts and a short sleeve shirt. Being a seasoned traveler, I am always prepared, so I offered her my pashmina from my back pack. The balloon ride didn't happen because of high winds which would have made the take off and landing too dangerous.

Two days later, we were at a resort at Ayers Rock, and a lady at lunch asked me whether I was in the bus for that failed balloon ride because she was at the back of the bus. She remembered my voice and my accent which

she identified as North American. What she said would really interest you. Disregarding the way I look, she said my offering my pashmina to the girl to keep her warm assured her that I must be a Canadian!!

So, who's a Canadian? It's all the Canadian citizens who look like you and me.