

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Equality: Progress and Potential in the 21st Century

25th Anniversary celebration of the Scarborough Women's Centre Rotunda, Scarborough civic Centre

September 10, 2008

Lynda, Hon. Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted to be here today to celebrate the Scarborough Women's Centre's 25th anniversary with so many of its supporters.

In 1982 when the Scarborough Women's Centre first opened, it filled an essential need for women, who were isolated, or in abusive situations, and did not know where to turn. There were very few Centres like this one at the time. The Scarborough Women's Centre gave women in despair hope for a brighter future.

When Lynda asked me to speak today, I reflected on my own life, on how much it has changed, and in what ways it has remained the same. I grew up in a traditional Chinese family which believed in a good education for girls, in order for them to bring up educated families, but not necessarily for girls to have professions.

What was it like in the early 1980s? I was just starting my design business then, and everywhere, Canadian women were beginning to assert their equal rights with men.

In 1980 in Nova Scotia, the first woman was elected leader of a provincial political party holding seats in a legislature. That woman was Alexa McDonough, a woman who went on to lead the national NDP Party.

In May, 1982, NDP MP Margaret Mitchell stood in the House of Commons to speak on the parliamentary report on battered wives, which stated that one in ten Canadian husbands beat their wives regularly. Before she could continue, she was interrupted by male MPs' shouts and laughter,

and a nearby Conservative member joked, “I don't beat my wife. Do you, George?”

When the Speaker finally restored order, Margaret Mitchell said:

“Madam Speaker, I do not think this is a laughing matter. What action will the Minister responsible for the Status of Women undertake immediately at the federal level to protect battered women?”

Women across the country were outraged by the incident, and for the first time, the issue of the routine abuse of women by their husbands received national attention.

In 1983, amendments were made to the Criminal Code that removed some of the rules that perpetuated bias against women. Rape laws were redefined to include a range of sexual assault offences, and, for the first time, the law made it a criminal offence for a man to rape his wife. In the same year, Ontario police began to be directed to lay mandatory charges in domestic violence cases.

The Canadian Human Rights Act of 1983 prohibited sexual harassment in workplaces under federal jurisdiction.

Before 1983, men rarely faced consequences for beating their partners, and women in workplaces had no legal recourse if their employers demanded sexual favours. Incidents like these still happen, but they are no longer acceptable in Canadian society.

You can imagine, even today, women face many obstacles in leaving an abusive or isolating situation. Some women may have never been in the workplace. Others may not have the necessary literacy and language skills. Some may lack sufficient education, and work experience. In some cultures in the immigrant communities, there is also a sense of shame and failure when women leave an abusive relationship.

For these reasons, it is important for us to have organizations like the Scarborough Women's Centre, which offers a crucial link between women who are abused and those who understand their situation, and can help them make the transition to a new life.

At the end of the 1980s, a horrific incident happened that galvanized Canadians into action. In December, 1989, at the Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal, Marc Lepine burst into an engineering classroom, asked the men to leave and shot the remaining women. Fourteen women were murdered that day. Apparently, the killer said he blamed ambitious women for his own lack of success. This incident brought Canadian society together against expressions of misogyny, and highlighted issues of abuse. So, you wonder, what progress has Canadian society made after all?

During the 1990s, new laws were passed to prevent stalking, and getting peace bonds was made easier to keep abusers away from their victims, which prevented re-victimization of women during court proceedings.

Perhaps, most importantly, during this period, women entered the workforce in much greater numbers. In fact, Canadian women have one of the highest levels of participation in the labour force in the world. Canadian society has begun to move towards respect and equality between the sexes. The dependence on men lessened as women's earning power rose.

Women have not only entered the labour force in much larger numbers, we are now also much better educated. In 2005, we earned more than 60% of all bachelor's degrees and about half of all master's degrees. Between 2006 & 2007, women received the majority of all medical degrees, more than half of all law degrees, and a third of all MBAs.

The dramatic increase in women's representation in educational institutions, and their significant presence in the professions bode well for our future. After all, education is the greatest leveler in society.

As a member of the Senate, I am very aware that women's representation in politics does matter. After all, Margaret Mitchell was able to focus on issues relevant to women only because she was elected to the House of Commons. Unfortunately, the number of women in politics has remained largely stagnant - around 21% in both the federal and provincial legislatures. Rwanda, Sweden, Cuba, Finland, and Argentina are all showing us the way forward with 40% or more in terms of the percentage of women elected to their legislatures. I think we can be doing much better, and as women, we have to demand change.

If we are to fulfill the potential for true equality in the 21st Century, we must be vigilant. We must not allow the gains we have made since the 1980s to be rolled back. We cannot be complacent. I regret to say that, despite arguments to the contrary made by this government, advocacy is still necessary. More work needs to be done, and women need to take on this challenge. It is always individuals, who simply refuse to accept the status quo, that bring about change.

Since we have just finished the Summer Olympics, I'd like to tell you the story of the women who changed the Games forever. In 1928 in Amsterdam, Canada's Olympic Team included women for the first time, competing in the track and field events at the Olympic Games.

The year still stands out as one of the best years ever for Canadian women in track and fields at the Olympics. One swimmer and six sprinters, dubbed the Matchless Six, competed, and forever shattered the world's idea that women could not be strong, competitive athletes.

One of these women, Fanny Rosenfeld, was one of the best athletes in Canadian history, winning a gold and a silver medals, and later was named Canadian Woman Athlete of the first Half Century in 1949. Nicknamed Bobbie for her bobbed hair cut by family and friends, she could do anything – play basketball, hockey, softball, and of course, run very fast. To this day, the Bobbie Rosenfeld Award is still given to Canada's best woman athlete as determined by the Canadian Press.

Ironically, Canadian women in 2008 are once again facing down the Olympic organizers in their efforts to compete in ski jumping in 2010 in Vancouver. While Olympic organizers claim it's not about gender, but based on "technical merit" and therefore not discriminatory, Canadian women athletes are not accepting it, because they say the ruling flies in the face of Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. They have set up a Petition on the Internet with which to lobby the IOC. Our eldest granddaughter, who is 12 and very athletic, was horrified when she heard about the decision by the IOC. Sometimes children are the wisest judges.

Like Bobbie, and the women ski jumpers, today's women entrepreneurs are breaking new ground for women, forever ridding the world of the idea that men are the natural leaders in the business world.

According to RBC, women entrepreneurs make up one of the fastest growing business segments in Canada, with over 800,000 self employed women contributing \$18 billion to the Canadian economy. Their companies create new jobs at four times the rate of the national average. Collectively, they provide more jobs than the Canadian Top 100 companies combined. The number of women incorporated businesses more than doubled during the last decade.

One of these women – described as a legend by Canadian Business Magazine – is Rebecca MacDonald. She graduated with a medical degree from Yugoslavia, and immigrated to Canada in 1974. Beginning with a small door-to-door Water Filter Company in 1978, she went on to found the Ontario Energy Savings Corp. in 1997. In 2001, it became the Energy Savings Income Fund of which she is now Executive Chair. In November, 2007, she topped the Profit W100 ranking of Canada’s Top Women Entrepreneurs for the fifth consecutive year with annual revenues of over \$1.5 billion.

Her advice to overcoming resistance to being an entrepreneur in an industry dominated by men is as follows:

“I was not brought up in Canada, so I did not have the experience that there are businesses for women and businesses for men. That helped me a great deal. I worked hard, showed people that I could do it, and maybe even do it that much better than men could. Eventually, I gained their respect. There was a lot of resistance at the beginning, so you have to win the little battles and eventually you win the war.”

Essentially, what both Bobbie and Rebecca did was to refuse to accept stereotypes. They worked hard towards winning respect, and overcoming all the small obstacles along the way to bring about larger changes. These are valuable lessons from two pioneers in their fields.

At this point, I want to emphasize what is often left out of such discussions. For women to move forward in any society, men need to move forward with them.

We have three sons and I have brought them up to know how to cook, do laundry, and sew on buttons. From their Dad, they learnt many other technical skills. So they are very handy at home. It made a lot of sense

because independence is very important in everyday life. To them, there is no difference between women's work and men's work, and they naturally pitch in when it comes to housework.

Inadvertently and subconsciously, I have brought up sons who fit well in the 21st century. I think the role of men in bringing about change is very important. Equality means that neither man nor woman is subservient. Instead, there is a mutual respect and a sharing of responsibilities.

To illustrate my innate belief in equality, I will tell you one incident that happened in the 1960s when we were living in Montreal. It was during my first pregnancy. I was on a public bus one day and took the last available seat. At the next stop, more people came on the bus, and among them was an elderly man. I got up and offered my seat to him because I felt that he needed it more than I did. But, he didn't take it, and turned and offered it to another woman! Well, he might have been insulted that I thought he was old!

To this day, I am still the same. I have no problem opening doors or holding doors for men or women, and especially children, if I happen to be there first. I do get some strange reactions from some men though!

Today, many men do housework, and they can and do nurture their children. Hopeful signs are that 56% of men in Quebec take parental leave, but in the rest of the country, the percentage is only about 11%.

A report entitled "Converging Gender Roles" suggests that things are changing in all areas for both men and women. Today, men are doing more housework. Women are less likely to quit work when they have children. According to the report, the "greater sharing of financial responsibility has led to a pattern of convergence whereby women and men increasingly come to see themselves not only as co-parents but as co-providers for their children."

Despite all that has been said, according to Catalyst statistics in 2006, women earned, on average, 72% of what men earned. A 2007 report also found that women's representation on corporate boards in Canada remains remarkably low. Women held 13% of board seats in the Financial Post 500, up only one percentage point from 2005. In fact, in 2007, more than 40% of FP500 companies in Canada still had no women board directors. I believe it

is mostly because candidates are still chosen from a narrow group made up mostly of white males.

Why do you think that is so? The attitude of many Canadians hasn't changed. This is partly because some women actually believe that we have already achieved equality, and they are very comfortable with the status quo. I see that among some of my women friends. These are usually women who don't work outside of their homes, and neither do their daughters, so they don't have any direct experience of challenges faced by women in the workplace.

At the same time, there is a certain mindset that is difficult to change. Despite all the rhetoric about equality, the status quo often applies. Some of my husband's friends would call our house and ask to speak to the "boss", and I would answer by asking "which one?" So, the man is still often regarded as the only head of the household.

A couple of years ago, during our granddaughters' stay at our cottage, we took them to the local museum, and I happened to notice a board inside the entrance listing names of major supporters of the museum. I saw my husband's name listed, and wondered when he had ever been interested in the museum. I am the one who has been supporting it for years. My husband was just as surprised. When I inquired, I was told by the person responsible that since the donation has the Poy name on it, my husband is given credit for it automatically. He did apologize profusely, and said that the name on the board was going to be changed.

This summer, I gave a donation through the local fire brigade, also at our cottage, to a camp for children who have suffered from severe burns. When I received the charitable receipt - guess what - it was made out in my husband's name, and he didn't even know anything about it. I know this is not done out of malice; it is just that the old mindset among many Canadians hasn't changed that much over the last half century.

Unfortunately, the attitude of many Canadians still hasn't come to accept absolute equality between the sexes. We do need to keep moving forward and bring our men with us. We need to continue to show Canadian society what women can achieve as equals.

I would like to believe the day will come when the services of the Scarborough Women's Centre in helping abused women will no longer be needed. Until that day, I am grateful that this Centre exists to help women who otherwise would have nowhere else to turn.

What an accomplishment, that 150,000 women and their children have so far benefitted from the services of the Scarborough Women's Centre! To all of you, who have played such an important role in the Centre, congratulations on a job well done.