

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

LEAP – YMCA/Ryerson University Youth Leadership Program

Feb. 28, 2009

It gives me great pleasure to be here today to congratulate the graduates of the LEAP-YMCA/Ryerson University Youth Leadership Program, on your many accomplishments. For all the parents in the audience today, you must be very proud of your children's achievements. I would like to thank you for giving your children this important opportunity.

As Chinese-Canadian youth high achievers, this program has prepared you to overcome the barriers you may face, so that you can become the leaders of tomorrow. Besides having communication skills, and confidence in yourselves, one of the major barriers you face is a lack of Chinese Canadian role models. Through this program, you have been exposed to some of our prominent Chinese Canadian leaders, and their guidance as mentors has been essential.

As the first Canadian Senator of Asian heritage, I was surprised when I arrived on Parliament Hill to find very few visible minorities, even among the staff. Parliament certainly didn't look like this city. The streets of Toronto are increasingly cosmopolitan, reflecting the fact that Chinese and South Asian Canadian communities are becoming the foundation of the GTA. If you look at Toronto's City Hall, this demographic change is still not evident.

In 1998, when I was appointed to the Senate of Canada, I had very few politicians I could go to for guidance on Parliament Hill, and so, I decided that one of my major tasks was to inspire our youth, so that one day, our federal Parliament would look like our urban centres.

Just look at the boards of Canadian corporations - there are still very few Chinese Canadians members. I know that many Canadians of Chinese heritage have left Canada to pursue opportunities in China, finding the glass ceiling a bit too solid to break through. So, we need all of you to move into leadership positions in the community, on corporate boards, in the media, in public service and in government.

The event today is in some ways like the Era 21 Breakfast for Young Canadians, which I host each year on Parliament Hill. We invite high achieving young Canadians from ethnic minority backgrounds to inspire high school students, by speaking about what they have accomplished. Through this annual event, I have met some very remarkable young people who do not conceive of obstacles, but only opportunities. The major theme of the Breakfast is that our heritage is an asset in helping us to achieve success, because we are bicultural or multicultural individuals, who can readily learn and adapt to a global economy.

This LEAP Program is uniquely suited to prepare you for success in the future, as it addresses the development of the whole person. While good grades are important, the ability to socialize with, to learn from, and influence others, who may think differently from you, is equally important. Being able to lead, to delegate, and to speak effectively in public, are important skills you will all need in your lives.

I would like to thank the many program sponsors for their foresight in funding, and supporting this program. Our youth are our future, and in supporting them, we ensure Canada's success as a nation.