

## **Opening Statement by Senator Vivienne Poy**

### **First Transatlantic Parliamentary Forum on diversity and inclusion Transatlantic Conference on Minority Political Leadership**

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Thank you for inviting me to be part of this Parliamentary Forum on Diversity and Inclusion.

As many of you may know, in Canada, we have had a policy of multiculturalism since 1971, as well as a Multiculturalism Law since 1988.

The underlying philosophy of multiculturalism is still best expressed in the words of our former Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, when he outlined the policy in the House of Commons in 1971:

“.....there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other. No citizen or group of citizens is other than Canadian .....Adherence to one’s ethnic group is influenced not so much by one’s origin or mother tongue as by one’s sense of belonging to the group. 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, attitudes and assumptions.”

Although Canada has always depended on immigration for much of our population growth, Prime Minister Trudeau could not have imagined how the face of Canada would change over the next 40 years. Based on our 2006 Census, fully 20% of our population is now foreign born, and more than 1 in 6 Canadians identifies as a visible minority. In the city of Toronto, where I live, we are very close to becoming the visible majority. The city of Vancouver already has a visible majority. In some smaller cities, the percentage is even higher.

Over the past decade Canada has accepted approximately 250,000 immigrants per year, or 0.7% of the total population, most of whom are economic immigrants. Canada’s immigration rate on a per capita basis is nearly double that of the U.S., although the absolute numbers that enter the U.S. are higher. As for the visible minority population, given recent immigration trends, Canada’s population of Asian origin is more than double that of the U.S., with the U.S. having a much larger percentage of Blacks.

A major factor in Canada’s success at integration is the Canadian attitude towards immigration, diversity, and multiculturalism. While we are hearing about conflict and dissension around issues of race in Europe, most recently in Germany and Britain, an international study released in February 2011 found Canada was bucking this trend. Almost 70% of Canadians polled felt that new jobs were created in 2010 by immigrants, and the vast majority agree that immigrants fill jobs when there is a worker shortage. 60% also felt that

immigrants helped enrich Canadian culture with their individual customs and ideas. All responses were considerably higher than those from Europe and the United States.

Despite our high immigration rates, and the positive views of the majority of Canadians towards immigration, Canada lags behind Sweden and Portugal, in terms of integrating and welcoming newcomers, in the recent Global Migration Integration Policy Index.

One of the most important factors in shaping Canada's positive attitudes to minorities has been our Charter of Rights and Freedoms which has consistently ruled in favour of equality rights for minorities, since it specifically protects religious and cultural freedoms. The most contentious issues have emerged in the province of Quebec where the legislature has recently rejected multiculturalism and the Supreme Court's Charter rulings, in favour of adopting a more rigid approach to minorities.

However, the steady tide of news from Europe on the demise of multiculturalism is having an effect, at least on the Canadian media, which is full of doom and gloom about the end of multiculturalism, perpetuating a myth that Canadians are rejecting the policy. There is even a new think tank which argues that Canada should roll back its immigration numbers, despite the fact that all economists, and the 2009 United Nations Human Development Report prove that immigration is a net benefit for the economy.

The challenge, going forward, is to translate some of the positive attitudes of the Canadian population into political gains for visible minorities. Although visible minority numbers are increasing in certain spheres, in terms of leadership positions, we are still underrepresented in most sectors, including in our public service especially at the Executive levels.

With increased political representation, we can adopt policy agendas that are more favourable to both immigrants and visible minorities who have lived in Canada for generations.