



DEBATES OF THE SENATE

1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT • VOLUME 148 • NUMBER 7

CHINESE CANADIAN HISTORY

Inquiry—Debate Adjourned

Speech by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Wednesday, June 15, 2011

THE SENATE

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INQUIRY—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Vivienne Poy rose pursuant to notice of June 7, 2011:

That she will call the attention of the Senate to a multicultural educational resource for all Canadians entitled “A Brief Chronology of Chinese Canadian History: From Segregation to Integration”, spanning the period from 1788 to 2010, which is a collaborative project by British Columbia scholars involving the Universities of British Columbia, Victoria and Simon Fraser.

She said: Honourable senators, by now you will have received a copy of “A Brief Chronology of Chinese Canadian History: From Segregation to Integration” in your offices. I hope you will take the time to look it over and share it with your families and friends and with schools in your neighbourhoods.

The chronology was produced by the David See-Chai Lam Centre for International Communication at Simon Fraser University, and the author is Emeritus Professor of Geography David Chuenyan Lai of the University of Victoria. It was a collaborative project of scholars from the University of Victoria, UBC and Simon Fraser University.

The main purpose of this publication is to develop greater awareness among Canadians of the historic nation building contributions made by Chinese Canadians and to encourage Canadians of Chinese ancestry to appreciate the significance of their heritage. At the same time, the chart is a contribution to the multicultural identity of Canada, and it is hoped that Canadians of diverse ethnicities will take on similar projects so that we may all learn from each other in a simple and succinct manner.

As honourable senators will note, the chart is in English, French and Chinese. In a few short paragraphs, the chart relates the history of the Chinese in Canada from 1788 to 2010, recognizing the contributions Chinese Canadians have made over more than two centuries in Canada, the challenges we have faced and ultimately the successful integration over the past few decades in Canadian society.

The chart begins in 1788, almost 100 years before Confederation, when the first groups of Chinese carpenters and shipwrights were brought to Nootka Sound by John Meares to build forts and large sailing ships. The text shows how the history of Chinese Canadians is intimately bound to Canada’s development as a nation.

At the beginning of the 1860s, thousands of Chinese labourers were brought in to drain swamps, dig ditches and build wagon roads to open up the interior of the colony of British Columbia during the gold rush in the Fraser Valley. Besides mining, many also worked in canneries, the lumber industry and as ranch hands, cooks, et cetera.

The majority of Canadians today know that the most difficult section of the Canadian Pacific Railway was built by Chinese labourers contracted by Andrew Onderdonk from California, as well as from China. As Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald

said, without Chinese construction workers there would be no railway. By the end of 1882, over 70 per cent of the railway workers were Chinese. Without the railway, one wonders whether the colony of British Columbia would have joined California instead of the Dominion of Canada.

Facing discrimination in labour practices, Chinese workers organized into unions and white workers soon joined with them under the banner of union solidarity. Their quest for equal rights during the Depression was supported by the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, the predecessor of today’s New Democratic Party.

The major turning point for Chinese-Canadian communities was the Second World War. Patriotism shown by their members was especially laudable because over the previous decades the attention of the Canadian government had been primarily focused on preventing the entry of Chinese into Canada, first through a hefty head tax and then through exclusion, which effectively barred them from entry into Canada from 1923 until 1947. Despite this, over 600 Chinese-Canadian men and women served in World War II, many of them behind Japanese lines in China, Sarawak and Malaya.

After the war, with the repeal of Chinese exclusion in the Immigration Act and the passage of the Canadian Citizenship Act, the door was opened to allow the reunification of Chinese families in Canada and, with the professions being opened to qualified Chinese Canadians, the first steps toward integration began.

With the introduction of new immigration regulations in 1962 based on skills and the subsequent introduction of a universal points system in 1967, the number of ethnic Chinese entering Canada rose dramatically. It has been the largest group of immigrants entering Canada since the 1980s.

With equality of opportunity came physical, socio-economic and political integration. Chinatowns across Canada have transitioned from being ghettos to major tourist destinations, especially now that Canada has finally realized its goal of being one of China’s approved destinations. In Toronto, there are several Chinatowns, as there are in Vancouver. Although Chinese Canadians are dispersed widely, often inhabiting the suburbs, Chinatowns remain to reflect Canada’s early history.

In Ottawa, the newly constructed Chinatown Gateway is winning awards and attracting tourists eager to see the capital city gateway, the only one of its kind in North America. It is a stunning structure which represents the combination of Chinese craftsmanship and Canadian engineering.

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Chinese Canadians are also represented in large cohorts in our universities and across the professions. Mixed marriages are common and, increasingly, the face of Canada reflects a fusion of cultures and the creation of a new interculturalism as communities merge as families.

However, the post-war period has not been without its struggles. Even as many Chinese Canadians entered politics, carved their niche in the professions, received the Order of Canada and were appointed to positions of power, their history remained unacknowledged and unspoken.

In June 1980, Parliament first recognized the contributions of Chinese Canadians in the construction of the CPR. This was followed by the introduction of an all-party resolution in 1987 recognizing the injustice and discrimination of the head tax and Chinese exclusion. In June 2006, the Parliament of Canada issued an official apology in the House of Commons for the historical mistreatment of the Chinese in Canada. These official public acknowledgements of the past have made it possible for many to look forward to the future.

In terms of members of Parliament of Chinese heritage, while there has been some progress, starting with Douglas Jung as the first MP elected to the House of Commons in 1957, it is slow. While there were only a handful of MPs of Chinese heritage in the last Parliament, the number increased considerably in the last election. I wish to congratulate all of them. Their names will be included in an update insert of the chart, which is tentatively planned for 2012 and which will focus on Ottawa's Chinatown and the new Ottawa Chinatown Gateway. Currently, inserts are being planned that focus on Vancouver and Victoria's Chinatowns.

In partnership with UBC's "Chinese Canadian Stories: Uncommon Stories from a Common Past," a bilingual website funded by Citizenship and Immigration's Community Historical Recognition Program, the project will make its educational content available through the World Wide Web later this year, making this information available internationally. This unique web portal will be updated regularly with current information, including the names of our newest MPs of Chinese heritage and stories about Chinese Canadians.

The initiative includes other important innovations, such as an online virtual experience, portable interactive kiosks and a searchable database of digital material created by partner organizations. This unique web portal will bring our communities and their stories into our schools to be shared internationally with students and researchers.

Honourable senators may wonder why I have brought these resources to their attention today. It is because I believe this multicultural educational resource offers a potential model to other ethnic communities. As Canada grows increasingly diverse, we need to know more about one another. The success of our

society depends on the sharing of our unique stories as communities. I hope this chart and the one-stop web portal dedicated to Chinese-Canadian history can serve as an inspiration for other communities in Canada to document their own histories, which have helped shape our development as a nation.

For me, multiculturalism is not a government department, nor is it a legislative tool or a stale policy on paper. It is continuously evolving, driven by the energy and passions of Canadians and their communities. It is about engaging and understanding one another and, through this process, learning more about ourselves.

Conflicts and misunderstandings do occur in society and I believe much of that stems from ignorance. We all need a greater awareness of the historic nation-building contributions made by every ethnic group. Projects such as this one offer a simple means through which to combat ignorance and promote greater understanding amongst us.

Canadians of Chinese ancestry who arrived in Canada in the last few decades need to appreciate their long history in Canada and the significance of their heritage. They need to know that we have been here for more than 200 years and have helped to build Canada from its earliest foundations and that we can be proud of what we have accomplished.

A new poll by the Association for Canadian Studies in Montreal found that more than three quarters of Canadians agree that "learning more about the history of Canada" would be the best way to strengthen their sense of attachment to the country.

The younger generation of Canadians is perhaps the most aware of our diversity. The faces in their classrooms reflect this reality, but their formal curriculum does not. Through outreach to educators and the provision of teaching materials for grades 5 to 12, I hope that printed resources, such as this chart, as well as the web portal and the digital materials, will help to remedy this situation. Our youth need to know that Canada's diversity is our greatest strength, just as it was more than two centuries ago.

Honourable senators, at this time, with leave of the Senate, I would like to table "A Brief Chronology of Chinese Canadian History: From Segregation to Integration."

The Hon. the Speaker *pro tempore*: Is leave granted, honourable senators, to table the document?

Hon. Senators: Agreed.