

## **Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy**

### **“A Question of Identity”**

**UBC Chan Centre Royal Bank Cinema,  
Vancouver, B.C.**

**Feb. 28, 2011**

**Good afternoon, students, scholars and friends:**

**First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Ray Hsu for inviting me to speak today.**

**Many years ago, I spoke to a group at the University of Calgary, and was asked by one of the professors, who emigrated from China, how he should describe himself - “Canadian Chinese” or “Chinese Canadian.” He was at a loss as to his identity. I asked him what passport he had and he said, “Canadian.” So, I said, you are a Chinese Canadian because you are a Canadian of Chinese descent.**

**Just because he’s a Chinese Canadian doesn’t mean he is a “hyphenated Canadian,” which is always used in a derogatory way to suggest that some are lesser Canadians. More often than not, this term is used to describe visible minority Canadians.**

**This issue goes back to the 1950s, when Prime Minister Diefenbaker said,**

**“..... I know something of what it (racial origin) has meant in the past for some to regard those with names of other than British or French origin as not being quite that kind of Canadian than those of British or French origin could claim to be. All through my life I have looked for that day that would bring about in this land a Canadianism which would be proud of its ancestry.....I am the first Prime Minister of this country of neither altogether English or French origin. So I determined to bring about a Canadian citizenship that knew no hyphenated consideration....I’m very happy to be able to say that in the House of Commons today in my party we have members of Italian, Dutch, German, Scandinavian, Chinese and Ukrainian origin....and they are all Canadians.”**

**I know that French Canadians are very proud of their ancestry. One day in the Senate, I asked my seatmate, Senator Marie Poulin, whether French Canadians are called hyphenated Canadians. She was really surprised, and said she had never heard the term. So, if French Canadians are not hyphenated Canadians, neither are Canadians who are proud of their ancestry, wherever they may have come from. Can we forget that Canada is a country built, alongside its indigenous peoples, by immigrants?**

Now, let's fast forward to 1971, when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau said in the House of Commons,

**“.....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.”**

That was 1971. Since then, Canada has evolved into a much more multicultural country because of increased immigration. This is due to the introduction of the points system in 1967, which removed the last vestiges of racial bias in our immigration policy, with the focus on education and skills. Since then, Canada has received immigrants from all over the world to fill the gap in our workforce, created by emigration to the U.S., and our low birthrate.

As we saw the decline in immigration from Britain, we also saw a rise in the number of immigrants from other parts of the world. In the 1980s, when Margaret Thatcher signed the agreement to return the sovereignty of Hong Kong to China, there was a huge increase in the number of immigrants from Hong Kong, due to the addition of business categories to our immigration program.

Ethnic Chinese were not the only large group entering Canada; South Asians also came in the thousands, as well as immigrants from many other countries. Since 2006, the number of Canadians of South Asian heritage has exceeded those of Chinese heritage. Our country became one of many races and cultures, with one nationality.

Who are Canadians? It is not unusual to read in the media about the difference between Americans and Canadians. Canadians are described as polite, nice people, and sometimes too modest. The Canadians one sees in the streets of our major cities come in rainbow colours. Michael Moore has depicted the “Canadian” characteristics in many of his films. It is more about our behavior than the way we look.

I will tell you an interesting story. A few years ago, my husband and I were travelling in the interior of Australia. In Alice Springs, I was picked up by bus with other travelers at 2 a.m., to go to an area to ride hot-air balloons. The reason it had to be at that time of night was because of the wind. As usual, I was well prepared for the early morning chill, even though the daytime temperature was 40C. Near our destination, one teenager on our bus, who was rather scantily dressed, complained that she felt cold. So I offered her a big wrap to keep her warm. I sat in the first row, and since it was very dark, we could barely see each other's faces.

Two days later, my husband and I were staying at the tent hotel at Uluru (Ayers Rock), and as everyone gathered for lunch, we were introducing ourselves, and where we came from. A lady said to me, “You were the one in the bus the other night offering something warm for that girl. I knew you had to be a Canadian!” That says a lot about how others see us.

And how do we see ourselves in our very diverse country?

A Nanos Research poll taken last summer for the Institute for Research into Public Policy found that the majority of Canadians strongly support immigration. And, what’s most interesting is the numbers were consistent across the country, agreeing that “immigration is a key positive feature of Canada as a country.” This positive outlook on immigration exists despite the fact that recent cohorts of immigrants have been doing less well economically than earlier cohorts, especially since the onset of the recession. So, the majority of Canadians still welcome immigrants; after all, we are but one step away from that category ourselves.

In November, 2010, an Angus Reid poll found that the majority of Canadians support multiculturalism, and that the highest level of support was found here in British Columbia. Aside from the regional support, what is striking is that positive feelings towards multiculturalism are much higher among young Canadians, aged 18-34, with almost 70% agreeing that multiculturalism has been good or very good for Canada.

The new reality is that younger Canadians don’t suffer from the same ignorance that may affect the older generation. They don’t think twice about having bubble tea, naan, curries, sushi, and stir fries, and they listen to music which is from everywhere and nowhere. They are global citizens who are uniquely comfortable with the diversity of Canada, and they are likely to marry based on mutual interests, rather than anything to do with ethnicity.

Prof. Will Kymlicka, of Queen’s University, recently wrote a report for the Government of Canada. In it, he said, “...we have witnessed not only growing evidence of Canada’s comparative advantage in the integration of immigrants, but also growing evidence that the multiculturalism policy has played an important role in this comparative success....there is growing evidence that immigrants to Canada fare better than most if not all other Western democracies.” He went on to say that, “recent research has revealed a high level of mutual identification and acceptance amongst immigrants and native-born Canadians.”

Our Canadian approach has been largely successful in creating the kind of pluralistic society that we aspire to. This view is supported by all the academic studies that look at educational outcomes, adoption of citizenship, degrees of social acceptance and political participation.

This success is also supported by most polls, even those taken immediately after September 11, 2001. For example, in 2002, 83% of Canadians agreed that people from different racial and cultural groups are enriching the cultural life of Canada. In 2006, the same percentage agreed that Muslims make a positive contribution to Canada.

When I said Canadians come in rainbow colours, I also mean the children of mixed marriages, and there are many, including our own grandchildren. It is interesting to note that the number of mixed unions between a visible and non-visible minority grew by 33% between the 2001 Census and 2006 Census. And, according to a poll last spring, the majority of parents have no problem with their children marrying someone from another race.

Is this pro-immigration, pro-multiculturalism, respectful society reflected in our mainstream media? Recently, I have noticed a disconnect between the media and our polls and all the academic research results.

Consider the *Globe and Mail* series last fall. A sample headline: “Multiculturalism: mosaic or mistake?” *Globe* readers were asked to respond to a poll where the question read: “Is multiculturalism a failed experiment in Canada?” Now, that’s not a leading question, is it? Much of the week-long series echoed this negative framing. Sample headlines: “When multiculturalism doesn’t work,” and a *Globe* editorial entitled “Strike multiculturalism from the national vocabulary”.

Last November, we also had the infamous *Maclean’s* article “Too Asian?” which went through many incarnations on their website due to objections from Canadians because of the article’s insinuations.

The *Globe and Mail* also hosts the editorial comments of Margaret Wenthe who, in addition to lending her name in support of *Maclean’s*, also defended the anti-immigration views of the newly established private think-tank, *The Centre for Immigration Policy Reform*. This group wants to severely curtail immigration numbers, and severely limit the entry of refugees into Canada, both being counter to our present national policy for immigration and refugee protection. Naturally, they favour any bill in parliament that would stop desperate individuals like the recent boatload of Sri Lankans from entering Canada.

In 2010, another Ottawa-based think tank, the *Macdonald-Laurier Institute* was established, which plays to the core values of the Harper government. It recently disputed Stats Can.’s crime statistics and their methodology. It is interesting how these think tanks are sprouting up in recent years, and the media often reports their findings, without reference to the source and their obvious bias.

In Ontario, the local public television station featured programs last fall called “The end of multiculturalism,” and referred to the ‘backlash to immigration’. What backlash, I wonder? Is it fear mongering, or because some of our journalists

are Eurocentric, and feel that, no matter what our situation is in Canada, we must follow the European trend?

We all know about the backlash against guest workers and immigrants in Germany and France, but this is Canada, not Germany or France, countries that did not have a positive multiculturalism policy, so their situation cannot be compared to our Canadian model. In the case of Germany, the lesson learned is that their treatment of Turkish temporary workers has led to their current impasse. The Harper government is increasingly opting for temporary workers as well, and we should be careful not to go down the German path.

The Institute for Research on Public Policy, in comparing Canada to Europe, in a major study in 2007 entitled *Belonging: diversity, recognition and shared citizenship in Canada* found that,

“there is little evidence of the deep social segregation feared in parts of Europe... Canada is not sleeping-walking into segregation. There is no justification for a U-Turn in multiculturalism policies comparable to that underway in some European countries.”

It seems that Britain is intent on taking a U-Turn. In the *New York Times* this month, an article entitled “Prime Minister Criticizes British ‘Multiculturalism’ as Allowing Extremism.” British Prime Minister Cameron said Britain “had encouraged immigrant groups to live separate lives, apart from each other, and the mainstream, and had failed to promote a sense of common identity centered on the values of human rights, democracy, social integration and equality before the law.” Mr. Cameron was also reported to have said, “we have failed to provide a vision of society to which they (immigrants) feel they want to belong.”

The British Prime Minister mentioned “common identity” and “belonging,” important concepts for a country like Canada. In my research and in my constant interactions with immigrant groups, I have noticed that immigrants are very happy to be living in Canada, as Canadians, no matter how hard life is because of the lack of credential recognition, and under-employment, because they believe the next generation has better opportunities.

I have also noticed at events organized by immigrant groups, our national anthem is always played at the beginning, but not so at so-called “mainstream” events. Immigrants want to belong and are proud to be Canadians. “Belonging” requires an open door through which people can enter and feel welcome. There is always a degree of negotiation in every successful relationship.

Public policy makers know that immigrants drive the economy, and we need to populate the country. So, with some exceptions, our immigrant population has generally felt welcome. The new Consul General of China based in Toronto told me last week how impressed he was at the level of engagement of our political leaders at

different levels of government at community events. He said, in all his previous postings, he had not seen it in any other country, including the U.S.

Our immigrants, as well as their children, show a strong desire to engage in our political system. They apply for citizenship at more than double the rate in the United States; they are active voters, and participate as candidates for public office. We have more foreign-born citizens elected to parliament in Canada than in any other country, both in absolute numbers and in terms of parity with their percentage of the population.

And immigrants' hopes for their children are being realized. Most of the second-generation are doing as well, or better, than their Canadian born counterparts. A new look by Ryerson University at the role of immigrants in spurring on innovation in Canada found that, despite making up only 20% of the population, at least 35% of our 1,800 Canada Research Chairs are foreign born.

So why does the mainstream media say there is a problem? Does the media have a right to define our identity? Only if we allow it to. It is time for a national discussion.

Sometimes, a catalyst comes along, and that catalyst for many of us was the November 10<sup>th</sup> article in *Maclean's*, originally entitled "Too Asian?" The article implied that Asian students work too hard, and are taking spaces at our top universities away from Canadian, that is, white students, whose university experience is more about partying and drinking. There are a number of issues with this article, but I am only going to concentrate on one, and that is, Canadian identity.

Like the W5 programme, "Campus Giveaway," aired by CTV on Sept 30, 1979, *Maclean's* deemed students who looked Asian to be foreign, or as the "other," as opposed to white students, who were Canadians. This is an incorrect depiction of who Canadians are. I don't have to tell you, especially in British Columbia, that there are many Canadians, who are not of Caucasian background, whose families have been here for generations. It is not acceptable that anyone should remove us from full participation in Canadian society because of our appearance. It is time we start speaking about racial origin and Canadian identity in a much blunter fashion. We must take a stand as to who we are.

Charles Taylor, a political philosopher, said, in reference to the recent European Islamophobia, that it's "the kind of utterly ignorant stupidity on which democratic societies flounder", and he went on to say, "but that's true of any kind of dismissive view of the 'other'".

When I talk about "we", I mean anyone who does not look Caucasian. Don't forget that we make up a significant and growing part of the Canadian population. According to the 2006 Census, 20% of our population is foreign born, and one in six

Canadians is a visible minority. One in five Canadians is an allophone. According to that Census, of the population in the city of Vancouver, 50.5% is non-white. In Richmond, it's 64.7%, and in Surrey, 45.8%. Don't forget, these were the numbers from 5 years ago, and I wouldn't be surprised if they are much higher now.

Now look at the projection last year (2010) by Stats Can, that, by 2031, approx. 1/3 of the Canadian population will be non-white. As you can see, our numbers are growing very fast, and it is time we take a stand as Canadians. I see a growing impetus across the country in defining who we are, especially on university campuses. This is so important because you are our future leaders, and you will define what kind of country our grandchildren and great grandchildren will live in. And there are major challenges ahead.

I am aware of what you have been doing at UBC, and I'm really impressed by your efforts. You probably already know that similar dialogues are taking place on a national level on campuses, as well as in city halls, across Canada. I have personally spoken at U Vic and U. of T.

And, thanks to social media, the national debate has successfully been conducted on the Internet, through Facebook, blogs, and twitter.

Aside from the "Too Asian?" article, some of the recent identity issues for Canadians have included the wearing of the niqab by those of the Muslim faith, and the carrying of kirpans by Sikhs.

Bill 94 in the Quebec legislature propose banning the wearing of the niqab by those either delivering or receiving public services, which also meant getting an education, or receiving medical treatments. Ironically, the Sikhs who were recently prevented from entering the Quebec legislature were planning to testify against Bill 94, to argue for tolerance of the niqab based on religious freedoms. Other religious groups, such as the Jewish Orthodox Council for Community Relations are also speaking out against Bill 94.

In the recent debate over carrying the kirpan into the Quebec legislature, Quebec ignored the Supreme Court ruling in 2006, that the carrying of the kirpan was protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms' provisions on religious freedoms, and that it constituted no security risk.

The motion to ban the kirpan in the Quebec Legislature was passed. Interestingly, a Parti Quebecois member declared that "multiculturalism is a not a Quebec value." I am glad that the Bloc Quebecois' proposed motion to ban the kirpan from the House of Commons failed, otherwise, Liberal M.P. Navdeep Bains would not be able enter the Chamber.

**In the cases of the niqab and the kirpan, are we again seeing groups considered lesser Canadians who don't deserve equal rights as defined by our Charter?**

**Last February, the world was watching the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, and it was Canada's opportunity to show the world that we are a multicultural country. It also took place in Vancouver, a city synonymous with diversity, which considers itself a part of the Asia Pacific region. We didn't see one Asian Canadian or other visible minority carrying the Olympic flag! What about David Suzuki, a man who most Canadians consider as one of the greatest Canadians?**

**And yet, on Parliament Hill, and in the press, all we heard and read about the Opening Ceremonies was that there wasn't enough French being used. Where is the Canada our visitors saw on our streets everyday at the Games? This exclusion was deliberate, and our foreign visitors are not stupid. There are those who still wish the world to think that Canada is a white country. Amazing! I thought the white Canada policy was abandoned 44 years ago.**

**Journalists in the mainstream media are acting as the gatekeepers who determine what viewpoints are heard, and how issues, such as race, are framed in the national debate. Haroon Siddiqui, a columnist at the Toronto Star, who was on the panel with me in the Town Hall meeting at the U. of T. last week, said that the media, more often than not, reflects the views of the owners. So, until the ownership of our major media reflects the diversity of our population, we, as Canadians, will have to continue to stand up in defining ourselves.**

**We need to have a dialogue to discuss the kind of country we are, and the values that we share as Canadians, and I can't think of better venues than university campuses. Sure, conflicts do exist, but they can be resolved based on our common values. We need to discuss why diversity is a major asset to our country. Since Canada aims to attract the best brains in the world, it is necessary for us to project our true image.**

**University courses, such as the Asian Canadian writing course, that focus on Canadians who are not of European heritage are essential, as they can help all of us to find our voice and our place in Canadian society.**

**So, what do Canadians look like? Who has the right to define us? Can we allow one fifth of our population to be treated as "the other"? As the Canadian population continues to become more diverse, we are all part of the answer in the evolution of our identity as Canadians.**