

## **Panel Presentation by Senator Vivienne Poy**

### **Do Words Matter?**

#### **Fourth Annual Critical Conversations on Diversity Conference Panel “Talk/No Talk: Who determines Critical Discourse?”**

#### **University of Victoria**

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Do words matter? Yes, they do, whether they are written or spoken. We are sensitive to what people say or write about us, and it can affect us in a positive or negative way.

Should there be freedom of speech? Yes, definitely. Is there a limit? The Canadian government has laws that set limits.

In the public domain, the media has a huge responsibility in setting the tone for the population. Our media should reflect the communities it serves, both the majority and the minority.

Good journalism doesn't need to create false divisions and controversy to appeal to readers or viewers. Canadian journalism is traditionally less sensational and less antagonistic than that of our American counterpart.

With respect to our national media, I wish to point out a few important facts. According to the 2006 Census, 20% of our population is foreign born, and more than 5 million Canadians are visible minorities (1 in 6). One in five Canadians is an allophone, including Aboriginal languages. The 2010 projection by Stats Can is that, by 2031, approx. 1/3 of the Canadian population will be non-Caucasian.

Since 2001, 60% of our immigrants have come from Asia. These educated, savvy and ambitious immigrants are also younger than the Canadian average, and they tend to settle in our urban centres, and are, therefore, essential to our economic future.

Reading the Maclean's article “Too Asian?” immediately reminded me of the program “Campus Giveaway” aired by CTV's W5 on Sept. 30, 1979. I thought to myself – “not again”.

The article started with the double spread of 2 East Asian students with a Chinese flag. So, what do international students have to do with the enrolment policies of Canadian universities for Canadian students? I wonder whether the editors were ignorant, or deliberately provocative?

When it comes to international students, all universities in western democracies are trying to attract them. For one thing, they help to fund these universities through paying very high tuition fees, and they also help stimulate the local economies. Besides, western governments look to this as a brain gain, because, if the top graduates remain as landed immigrants, governments have not subsidized their education.

The article, though, is not about international students; it's about Canadian students, who make up the majority of our student bodies. The similarity between this article and "Campus Giveaway" is uncanny – it's about "Asian" students taking away university spaces from "Canadian" students. The supposition is that, if one looks Asian, one is foreign. Once again, we are portrayed as outsiders, not as Canadians, no matter how many generations we have been in Canada.

"Asian" students are those who have no university life, and they hide and study, and "Canadian – or White" students party and drink, and believe that spaces in our best universities are their entitlement. The racialization is inaccurate on both counts. Hard work and the will to succeed for the second generation in a new country is part of the immigrant psyche, and criticism by a national periodical of high achieving university students is retrogressive for Canadian society.

"Campus Giveaway" was aired 32 years ago, and based on our recent statistics, one wonders why some Canadian media haven't progressed since then?

If Canadians are only supposed to be "white," that supposition excludes not only me, but also a sizable segment of the Canadian population. I have lived in Canada for 52 years, and I will not be treated as "the other?"

Even though some of our Media doesn't get it, our universities certainly do. They accept the top students because they are constantly competing internationally, not only to attract the best brains from all over the world, but also because it is important for the future of Canada.

The Canadian government also gets it. Canada Research Chairs are given to scholars and scientists nationally and internationally, in order to attract talent to Canada, and the colour of the skin of the recipients is irrelevant. After all, knowledge has no colour or geographical boundary.

The Department of Canadian Heritage provides public funding for Canadian periodicals. Macleans received \$1.5 million for 2010-2011. Between 2008-2009, it received \$3 million. Publications can be deemed ineligible for these funds, according to the Canadian Heritage Website, if they "contain offensive content, defined as material that is denigrating to an identifiable group" in the opinion of Canadian Heritage. Since the "Too Asian?" article was deemed racist and offensive by Asian Canadian communities across the country, I wrote the Minister to tell him that the magazine is not worthy of tax payers support, and requested that its funding be reviewed.

Having said all that, I do believe in freedom of speech. The important question here is whether a magazine is deserving of public funding. In our daily lives, we have the freedom not to buy anything we don't like. And as taxpayers, we have the right to object to having our tax dollars support material that is offensive to a segment of the Canadian population.