

**Panel Presentation by Senator Vivienne Poy**  
**Town Hall on Race in Media & Higher Education**

**OISE Library, University of Toronto**

**February 15, 2011**

Good evening friends:

Despite the fact that I earned my postgraduate degrees at the University of Toronto, and served as its Chancellor for a term, I am in no position to speak on behalf of the University, or any other institutions of higher education. However, I am here to give you my opinion.

I also wish to make it clear that Maclean's does not represent media in Canada, but only a particular right wing fringe. What is unfortunate is that journalists sometimes pick up stories from each other. If racism and divisiveness in the media goes unchallenged, it infects the general level of debate in the country.

I sense, from some of the letters I've received regarding the Maclean's article, that it gave some in Canadian society permission to be racist, with statements like white students should have the chance to hang around "with their own kind." In a diverse country like Canada, this is troubling.

The other thing that was notable was that it was almost exclusively Asian Canadians who thanked me for standing up for them by suggesting Maclean's had gone too far. So, the Maclean's article created divisions in our society, and that is, perhaps, exactly what they intended to do.

There is a fear that if we react too strongly to these stories, we are being politically correct and stifling free speech. I wish to emphasize that free speech and debate are vital to higher education and media. However, we do know that not everything is acceptable, even in the name of free speech.

If I express an opinion openly, it's just my opinion. But when a view is expressed in the media, it is amplified. Unfortunately, many of us still tend to believe in the objectivity of our media, so from what we hear and what we read, there is the immediate presumption that we are being told the truth, even though it may not be expressed objectively at all.

Good journalism doesn't need to create divisions and controversy to appeal to readers or viewers. It should promote cohesiveness in society. Canadian journalism is traditionally less sensational and less antagonistic than that of our neighbour down south, and we should continuously strive to keep it that way.

Remember Michael Moore's, *Bowling for Columbine*, where he tries to understand why the U.S has so many violent crimes compared to countries in Europe and Canada. He compared Windsor to Detroit across the bridge. Windsor had very few murders historically, and Detroit is known as the murder capital of America. In fact, in 2010, Windsor boasted no murders at all. Michael Moore came to the conclusion that it had something to do with the tone of the media; ours is less about fear, and conflict, and more about polite dialogue. Do Canadians want to follow in the U.S. footsteps?

It seems that our media has failed to grasp the rapid changes in Canadian society. As of the last Census in 2006, 20% of our population was foreign born, and 1 in 6 Canadians were visible minorities. The 2010 projection by Stats Can is that, in 20 years time (2031), approximately 1 in 3 Canadians will not be Caucasian. Also, since 2001, 60% of our immigrants have come from Asia. Because of the way our immigrants are selected, many of them are highly educated, they are generally younger than the Canadian average, and they are essential to our economic future.

The Maclean's article "Too Asian?" 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. 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 want them because they pay high tuition fees. If the top graduates remain as landed immigrants, it's a brain gain for Canada. So, for higher education institutions, it's very important that they respond to articles like the one in Maclean's because it paints Canada as a racist country, and this, in turn, will drive away the high quality students our post-secondary institutions are trying to attract.

A very good example is what has happened in Australia where there has been a sudden drop in the number of international students in its universities, right across the board. One of the reasons is the negative publicity about racial intolerance, and persistent targeted violence. One of the largest universities in Australia had to lay off about 300 staff last year as a result of the drop in student enrolment.

But, the Maclean's article isn't really about international students, even though the photo spread says otherwise – it's about Canadian students that make up the majority of our student bodies. 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, despite the fact that some of our ancestors arrived in Canada before Confederation.

“Asian” students are portrayed as those who “hide and study,” and “Canadian – or white” students “party and drink,” while believing that spaces in our best universities are their entitlement. The racialization is inaccurate on both counts. While hard work and the will to succeed for the second generation in a new country is part of the immigrant psyche, this tradition is often, fortunately, passed on to future generations. Criticism by a national periodical of high achieving university students is retrogressive for Canadian society, and will hurt the future competitiveness of Canada.

If Canadians are only supposed to be “white,” that supposition excludes not only me, but also a large segment of the Canadian population, as well as two of our former Governor Generals.

The portrayal of Asian Canadians as “the other” by the media is not new. A few years ago, the media highlighted the controversy in Surrey, BC, because South Asians there were voting as a block for a South Asian candidate. When Caucasians vote en masse for a candidate, or live together in the same neighbourhood, the media does not comment. However, when visible minorities, and in some cases, visible majorities, live in the same neighbourhood, it is referred to as a ghetto, even if it is an affluent suburb.

I am not “the other,” and neither are all Canadians who don’t happen to have European heritage. The Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba is Philip Lee from Hong Kong. Calgary has a mayor named Naheed Nenshi. The University of Alberta has a female President who came to Canada from Sri Lanka. So perhaps, Canadian newsrooms need to learn more about the realities of Canada’s diversity. We need a lot more good news stories about the positive contributions of Canada’s diverse population.

Even though some of our media doesn’t get it, our universities certainly do. They accept the top students because they have to constantly compete internationally, not only to attract the best brains from all over the world, but also because these top scholars, innovators and researchers, are vital to the future of Canada.

The article in Maclean’s has, inadvertently, highlighted the importance of this kind of conversation about diversity and racism across the country, which is very necessary. Our higher education institutions are on the right track, but they cannot remain complacent. Anti-racism policies need to be established together with a culture of welcome, based on meritocracy.

As our population continues to diversify, there will be more challenges ahead. Like the media, universities and colleges need to set an example. After all, they produce our future leaders, and what they do now will determine the kind of Canada our future generations will inherit.

I would end by thanking everyone who has risen to the challenge by rejecting divisive dialogue. Remember, whatever your ethnic backgrounds, we all share the same goals. Let’s use these events as catalysts for bringing people together, rather than separating us into opposing camps.