

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Åland Parliamentary Auditorium Åland, Finland

September 12, 2012

Thank you Madame Speaker. Good afternoon Members of Parliament and of the community:

I would like to begin by thanking my dear friend Ingrid Iremark for giving me the opportunity to be here to speak on Canada's approach to immigration, cultural diversity and bilingualism.

I can say that I am a good example of a Canadian of the 21st century. I was born in Hong Kong, and went to Canada for university on a student visa in 1959. I stayed in Canada because I married a Canadian. This story is very similar to that of many new Canadians.

I believe the situation of Åland and Finland is very similar to that of Quebec and Canada, especially with respect to language policies. This visit is an invaluable opportunity for me to have a chance to learn first-hand about your experiences.

I understand that Åland would like to learn how other countries manage immigration, even though, at present, your immigrant population is very small.

Why does any country take in immigrants, especially a country like Canada which once had a "White Canada" policy? Canada was, and still is, an immigrant nation because we need labour. Unlike European countries, which have long histories and traditions, Canada is a new country, geographically vast with a small population, less than 1/10th that of the U.S. Canada encouraged immigration from northern Europe until the 2nd World War. Yes, there were a few Chinese, Japanese and South Asians but they were not welcome to stay in Canada.

I will tell you how Canada became a multicultural country as it is today. Real changes began after the 2nd World War. Canadians died in fighting against Nazism and Fascism, and they saw what happened to millions of Jews. John Peters Humphrey, the principal author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a Canadian, who represented the post-war emphasis on human rights. Canadian policy makers realized that their immigration laws no longer matched the mood of the nation. And, at the same time, business groups had jobs to fill. Thousands of dispossessed Europeans came into Canada as refugees.

Within Canada, human rights activists worked with the Chinese community to have the 1923 Chinese Exclusion in the Immigration Act repealed. This change enabled family members of Chinese Canadians left in China to join them in Canada. Despite the gradual change in the policies, immigration still favoured Europeans.

In subsequent years, Canada continued to need labour, especially when many immigrants who came into Canada moved to the U.S. The greatest change came in the 1960s with the establishment of the points system in 1967 which removed all racial barriers in our immigration policy. Since then, Canada has chosen independent immigrants based on the education and skills that Canada needed. It was because of this change that the Canadian population became very diverse.

Canada is known for its humanitarian policy towards refugees, and during the Vietnam War in the 1970s, Canada led among all western nations in taking in the greatest number of refugees per capita. The introduction of the points system, and the subsequent introduction of the business and investor categories in immigration in the 1980s, brought many Asians into Canada. After that China became the top source country for immigrants to Canada. However, in 2010, it was overtaken by the Philippines. For many years, India has also been one of the top 3 source countries. So, you can see how diverse the Canadian population has become.

You may wonder how we manage integration? Remember I mentioned the 1960s, when Canada began to welcome immigrants based on skills and education, and not on racial backgrounds? In 1963, the Pearson government launched the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in order to resolve the issues between the English and the French speaking populations. The end result was not what the government expected, because the testimonies of the witnesses from across the country showed that Canada was not bicultural but multicultural.

The report came out in 1969 when Pierre Elliott Trudeau was prime minister. On October 8, 1971, he announced the multicultural policy in Parliament. He said, "A policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework commends itself to the government as the most suitable means of assuring the cultural freedom of Canadians. Such a policy should help break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies. National unity if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense, 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." This policy was later enacted in the Multiculturalism Act of 1988. That is why Canada is a bilingual and multicultural country.

A very important aspect of our legal system, which helps to maintain the multicultural character of Canadian society, is our *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, enacted as Part I of the Constitution Act of 1982, when Canada repatriated our Constitution. The Charter gives our judges unique powers which often supersede that of parliament. Laws that are passed by parliament can be challenged in our courts if they are deemed to infringe on the rights guaranteed by the Charter. Over the years, our Supreme Court has heard a wide range of Charter challenges focused on gender, ethnicity, security, language, and religious rights, among other issues.

The protection of minority rights in our Charter is what makes Canada a desirable country for immigrants. The Charter was put to the test in the 1980s, when Baltej Singh Dhillon, a Sikh, applied to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police - our federal police force - for acceptance. He met the entrance requirements, but was initially told that he would have to give up wearing the turban in favour of the force's traditional hat. He was allowed to train with no guarantees. The RCMP Commissioner, Norman Inkster, sided with

Dhillon in April 1989, and proposed a change to the RCMP rules. Solicitor General Pierre Cadieux, gave his ruling, allowing the wearing of the turban in the RCMP. The fact that Dhillon could wear his turban as an RCMP officer established a precedent that opened the door for all Sikh Canadians to enter the RCMP.

I believe that citizenship is what binds a person to a country. In Canada, any immigrant who is 18, a permanent resident, and has lived in Canada for 1,095 days in the past 4 years, and has passed the citizenship exam can become a Canadian citizen. Most new Canadians take up citizenship as soon as they are able. Today, about 20% of Canadians are foreign born and one person in six has a language other than English or French as a mother tongue.

The visible minority population – someone who looks like me - probably a term you may not be used to, is already the majority in some Canadian cities. With current trends in immigration of approximately a quarter of a million per year this will increase to 1 in five by 2017 according to Statistics Canada. In places like Vancouver, which serves as our gateway to Asia Pacific, and Toronto where I come from, other languages than English and French are growing in importance. Ever since 2001, Chinese has over-taken Italian as the third most spoken language in Canada.

Remember what I said earlier about Canada being a bilingual country. Our language policy is similar to Finland's in many ways. Federally, our country has two official languages. The Official Languages Act requires the equal status of English and French in all federal institutions, including Parliament, the courts, and the public service. In 2005, it was beefed up to include provisions to protect and support minority language communities - for the Francophones outside of Quebec, and the Anglophones within Quebec.

With a population of 34 million, Canada is a decentralized federation with 10 provinces and 3 territories. And similar to Åland, the provinces and territorial legislatures have jurisdiction over education, health and social services, job training, local government, natural resources and the administration of justice, while sharing many other powers with the federal government, including taxation. Each level of government is free to enact laws in its areas of responsibility, including language laws.

Similar to Åland, with Swedish as its official language, our province of Quebec has French as the sole official language. This was brought about by Bill 101 which was challenged in the courts, after the passage of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and was amended with respect to the language of education. The province of New Brunswick is the only bilingual province in Canada. The rest of the provinces and territories have various laws to recognize the official status of English and French. You probably already know the majority of the population in the other provinces speaks English.

French is the mother tongue for 23 per cent of Canadians and of most Quebecers. About 1 million Quebecers speak English as their first language, and about the same number of Francophones speak French outside Quebec. Because of the status of French in Quebec, the province has special agreements on immigration. The Canadian government provides financial support for French in the arts, radio and television, across Canada.

Canada, as a country, is made up of our First Nations, the French, the English, and the ever increasing number of other racial groups from all over the world. As of today, there is still a disconnect between Canada's policy makers at the political level and its growing new Canadian population, even though Canada saw the highest level of visible minority representation in the last federal election - at just under 10 % out of a total visible minority population of more than 16%. Although this is good, it is still not adequate as our demographics continue to evolve. Even if we are beginning to see politicians who represent our population, it is difficult to say if this is translating into any meaningful change in policy with respect to new Canadians.

As a member of the Senate of Canada, I value Canada's official languages and appreciate Canada's three founding cultures – French, English, and the aboriginals whose lands we share. But, as a visible minority and the first Asian Canadian in the Senate of Canada, I have spent much of my last 14 years trying to convince Canadians that Canada has evolved over the past 50 years. It is important for our government to recognize and embrace these changes, and make use of our new Canadians as a bridge across the oceans for Canada. I believe that failure to take advantage of Canada's increasing diversity is detrimental to our prosperity.

As Canadians, we are well aware of the advantages for trade and commerce of having two official languages. But, we need more. More languages and more understanding of other cultures. Policy makers, businesspeople, and educators are realizing that this is necessary if we are going to compete in the world.

Perhaps it comes down to a question of our identity because of the diversity of our population. So what is Canadian culture? What do Canadians look like? Increasingly, Canadians are speaking about our shared diversity, and how our blended identities are the unique feature of being Canadian. It's a topic I have often been asked to speak on. My answer is that we are defined by the way we behave and not by the colour of our skin. We should all bring the best from our countries of origin, and integrate fully into Canadian society. To me, integration is the key to success in any society. On the other hand, the host society also needs to be welcoming.

However, for many older Canadians, this kind of language is scary. This is particularly true of Quebecers who have a deep insecurity about anything that upsets the status quo. A panel on reasonable accommodation was launched in Quebec a few years ago, and it concluded that Quebecers needed to change and adapt to new immigrants, and that there must be dialogue among all Quebecers. But, despite the recommendations of the government panel, social interactions are very resistant to change. I am sure you are familiar with this situation in other European countries.

In most provinces across Canada, the wearing of the hijab and the niqab have caused little unease, with the exception of Quebec which has banned girls from wearing the hijab in soccer games on a number of occasions. It has also proposed a law that would forbid government services to Muslim women wearing a niqab. I believe you had a similar controversy over the headscarf in schools in Raseborg, Finland, which banned Muslim girls from wearing the headscarf in 2010, although it subsequently retracted the decision.

Now, Mm Marois, the leader of the Parti Quebecois, who won the recent provincial election, proposes to ban all religious symbols, including the wearing of turban, kippah, hijab and kirpan by Quebec public servants. Please keep in mind that the cross is still in the Quebec Legislature, and the wearing of the cross is allowed! All these proposals came when Quebec is already failing to meet immigration targets, and losing the few who initially settled there. It may be good politics, but it's bad economics.

In Canada, with its Conservative government, it is worrying to see a recent change in language and attitude towards new Canadians. Integration was the buzzword for the longest time, but increasingly, I am hearing the word assimilation. It is surprising that it is on the website of Senator Yonah Martin, a Korean Canadian Conservative Senator. What's the difference between integration and assimilation, you may ask? For me, integration means helping people to settle in Canada, learn the languages and cultures, respect the law, get a job, make friends, while, at the same time, keeping their cultures, languages and support structures in place. I must add, religion is a private matter, and should never be allowed to supersede the law. I can say that I have integrated well into Canadian society, but I have never lost the Chinese language or the positive values in the Chinese culture.

Assimilation into the mainstream culture also means abandonment of one's language and cultural practices. It was the attempt at forced assimilation into English Canada that radicalized the French in Quebec and gave rise to a violent political crisis in the 1960s. The French Quebecers rebelled against the English attempts to eradicate their culture and language. Remember the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism I spoke about? The end result was Canada becoming an officially bilingual country, with special accommodation for Quebec.

Assimilation, in the case of the First Nations, had devastating results. Their children were taken away from their families and put into residential schools, which banned the use of their languages and the practice of their cultures. Some of you may know the sad psychologically damaging results brought to that generation. Over the years, the Canadian government has been apologizing and compensating those who have suffered.

Now we see a reversal, because this generation of First Nations youths are being encouraged to learn their own languages and cultures. For the first time in almost 20 years, Kindergarten classes in Behchoko, NWT, are offered entirely in Tlicho Yati, the language of the Tlicho First Nation.

What's sad about the recent backlash with this government is that this is not what Canada today is all about. Our younger generation grows up with youth from all over the world, in their schools, in their communities and as their friends. They are used to eating sushi and kimchi in their restaurants. They have no qualms about interracial marriages. Many young parents have told me that their children of mixed races are the typical Canadian children of the new generation.

As a multicultural country, Canada is stronger, not weaker. We have more languages, we are comfortable with many cultures, and this gives us a global competitive advantage. Canada's greatest advantage is the human capital of our multicultural society.

Thank you for your interest. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.
