

Panel Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

The Liberal Party of Canada Biennial Convention

**Workshop:
Improving Participation: Not Just a Numbers Game**

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I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Multiculturalism for the invitation to speak on this panel and wish to express my congratulations to the Committee, and its chair Bhagat Taggar, for their important work in its organization.

Although my remarks may be applicable to other ethnic communities in Canada, I am going to speak today on the area I know best, and hope that my participation will help to bring better understanding of the Chinese-Canadian community.

Not many non-ethnic Chinese realize that the Chinese-Canadian community is anything but homogenous. Immigrants who came before 1967 were all from a very small geographic area of South China. They all speak Cantonese plus their village dialects. Those immigrants who came since 1967 are much more diverse. There are groups from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, South America, the West Indies and India. In recent years, the largest group of ethnic Chinese immigrants has come from mainland China. You can imagine the diversity of languages these ethnic Chinese speak. Even though there is only one written Chinese language, the main language spoken in the community is Cantonese, however, Mandarin is gaining importance.

Canadians of Chinese descent have been here for generations, but why is the community as a whole not more politically active? We must keep in mind that it has only been since 1947 that Chinese-Canadians have been recognized as full and equal citizens by Canadian law and have had the right to vote.

This historic discrimination created a bit of a paradox.

To be sure, the denial of the vote to Chinese-Canadians, and the implementation of racial legislative measures such as the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, which outlawed Chinese immigration to Canada between 1923-1947, hampered Chinese participation in the political process. The message from Canada to Chinese-Canadians at that time was quite clear: “you are wanted to work here, but not as citizens of this country.” Even those born in Canada were denied citizenship rights. Unfortunately, the perception of not being welcomed still persists today, especially when there are sporadic incidents of racial tension.

The participation of Chinese-Canadians during World War II, and the lobbying efforts of these veterans, as well as the community for equal rights after the war, forced Chinese-Canadians to become political, simply to survive and respond to the challenges that they faced. It is not too surprising, therefore, that ten years after winning the right to vote, the first Chinese-Canadian, Douglas Jung, was elected to the House of Commons.

However, due to Canada’s discriminatory immigration policy, the Chinese-Canadian community remained small, not vocal and not politically involved. Having gained the rights to full citizenship, the community settled down to making a living and minding its own business.

Since the adoption of the non-racial point system for immigration in 1967, a large influx of new immigrants has not only changed the face of Canada, but also the Chinese-Canadian community, which has matured into a force that politicians, journalists and political parties cannot ignore.

I have always been aware that many ethnic Chinese vote for the Liberal Party because of its immigration policy. The conventional wisdom is that the Liberals are pro-immigration, pro-family reunification. Other parties are seen as being more hostile, and not as welcoming.

Chinese-Canadians remember that it was the Liberal government of Lester Pearson who instituted a non-racial immigration policy in 1967. They remember that it was the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau in 1971 that took the next step beyond a welcoming immigration policy, and established Canada’s multiculturalism program. They remember that it

was the Trudeau government that established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, facilitating mainland Chinese immigration to Canada in large numbers for family reunification. From personal experience, I can tell you that people still talk about the enormous positive impact that the Liberal Party has had on the Chinese-Canadian community. This is a tremendous heritage for the party to build upon. Our strong immigration policy and support for multiculturalism complement each other, making it possible for Canada to prosper, free from many of the racial tensions seen elsewhere in the world.

A comment has to be made about the media blitz since last summer of the few hundred illegal Chinese migrants arriving on leaking boats off of the British Columbia coast. This has caused a great deal of racial tension, given that the media is referring to only a few hundred of the 20,000 individuals who arrive in Canada without documents. The point I want to make here is that it is important that the Liberal party does not lose sight of our humane refugee policy, and does not allow the opinion of a vocal few to cause a backlash that will have a negative impact on those who seek refuge in our country.

As I mentioned earlier in reference to different waves of ethnic Chinese immigrants, a significant Chinese-Canadian middle class has been established in Canada since the 1980s, a community that boasts a full spectrum of political opinions.

What are the main concerns of the Chinese-Canadian community today? The one that affects the majority is still immigration. And this is the one issue that will have the greatest impact in the next federal election.

The other important issue is the economic and business climate and taxation. This, I know impacts on everyone, especially the business community. The reason I bring it up is because of the entrepreneurial culture among ethnic Chinese in general, and in particular, the large number of Chinese business immigrants who came to Canada in the 1980s. The perception that Canada is bad for investments is a negative one. From personal experience, I can say that there has been a significant number of Chinese-Canadians, including those in their early 20s, who have moved back to Asia because of what they have perceived to be an economic environment here that is not business-friendly. It is all too easy for a country to lose investments, as well as talents, but very difficult to gain them back. The

latest budget is a step in the right direction in addressing this situation. It is of utmost importance that the Liberal government is perceived to be good for business.

As for the contentious issue of Canada-China relations and Canada-China trade, the Chinese-Canadian community wants to see Canada-China trade continue and flourish. Not only would it be beneficial for Canada, it is also seen as the best way to bring about prosperity and democratic change to the region. In the world of business, there are no political borders. An example is the situation between China and Taiwan. Despite the sabre-rattling, trade flourishes. Many Taiwanese businesses have large holdings in China.

Given that we know that these are the most important issues within the Chinese-Canadian community, how can the Liberal Party tap into these interests, concerns, and act upon them? How can we bring more Chinese-Canadians into the Liberal Party? How can we gain more Liberal candidates that are of Chinese-Canadian heritage? And how can we ensure the community's support at the polls?

First of all, we must strive to make all Canadians, whether they are recent arrivals or have lived here for generations, feel included and appreciated. Too often, Canadians of Chinese descent are perceived as "foreigners." I know this applies equally to other visible minorities. We must take measures to counter such perceptions. One example that immediately springs to mind is sensitivity training for our customs and immigration officers, who are the first faces that people meet upon arrival in Canada. I would stress that people remember how they, as well as their families and friends, are treated. If they are treated rudely or in a discriminatory manner, this increases a sense of exclusion from Canadian life that may be translated into a lack of political involvement.

Divining the political mood of the ethnic Chinese community appears to be a difficult business for most politicians. But the Chinese-Canadian community is not the enigma that some may think. It is a highly educated, entrepreneurial and globalized community. The Liberal party needs to identify individuals who would be good candidates and actively support them. This will ensure greater participation by the community.

Of no less importance is the Chinese-Canadian media, which has evolved in recent years into sophisticated operations that can compete with, and often beat, the mainstream media on the local, as well as international scene. There is a Chinese satellite TV station, many daily Chinese-language newspapers and magazines, and a host of Chinese language radio stations throughout Canada.

The Chinese-Canadian media is international, reaching Chinese communities all over the world. As a powerful force, it plays an important role in influencing the Chinese-Canadian community. Therefore, the Liberal Party, and more importantly Liberal candidates, MUST build up their relationship with this segment of the media. It is a means of understanding the immediate issues at play in the Chinese-Canadian community, and it is a method of reaching a large portion of the community.

Ultimately, participation in the political process, along with broader issues of social justice and integration into Canadian society, will be achieved through partnerships with social agencies, community groups, ethno-cultural organizations, and the private sector. We must not lose any opportunity to strengthen our ties with such institutions and groups.

By way of a conclusion, I would make the point that what we are doing here is more than just politicking and seeking votes or candidates. Rather, what we are engaged in is an acknowledgement of unmistakable societal trends and the transformation of Canada. Not just for the sake of the Liberal Party, but for the sake of our country, we must embrace this transformation.

Thank you.