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INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION

Inquiry–Debate Adjourned

Speech by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Tuesday, March 26, 2002

THE SENATE

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INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION

INQUIRY—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Vivienne Poy rose pursuant to notice of March 19, 2002:

That she will call the attention of the Senate to the significance of March 21st, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

She said: Honourable senators, since 1966, March 21 has been recognized as the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Canada was one of the first countries to support the UN declaration.

In 1989, the Department of Canadian Heritage launched its annual March 21 campaign in response to the need to heighten awareness of the harmful effects of racism on a national scale and to demonstrate clearly the commitment of the federal government to fostering respect, equality and diversity. As such, it is clear that the elimination of racism remains a goal to which Canadians aspire. It is in this context that I wish to consider where we are now in this process and what we still must do to move toward our goal of eliminating racial discrimination.

Before we look at that process, we must consider the significance of this debate. What do we mean when we speak about the harmful effects of racism? Of course, racism is in direct opposition to the ideology of the society we wish to create. It is the antithesis of tolerance, equality and respect for diversity called for in our national policy of multiculturalism.

Reiterating these goals is especially important since September 11, 2001, since some people now feel that they have been given a licence to express racial hatred, even though recent polls have found support for a policy of tolerance remains rock-solid.

However, eliminating racism is far more than ideological. It is also a legal and economic issue. As long as we fail to address these aspects, we will not be true to the intent of the equality provisions contained within the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, nor will we benefit fully from the human capital that is essential to our global competitiveness.

In February of this year, the Canadian Council on Social Development released a report in which it concluded that recent immigrants have not done as well in the job market as previous arrivals to Canada, despite the fact that a large proportion of recent immigrants tended to be highly educated. In fact, in 1998, 72 per cent of immigrants selected in the skilled worker category had university degrees. Overall, in 2000, 58 per cent of working-age immigrants had post-secondary education, compared with 43 per cent of the Canadian population. Nevertheless, according to census data from 1981 to 1996, there

was a progressive trend toward lower rates of labour force participation and lower levels of earnings among immigrants compared with the Canadian-born population.

The council concluded that part of the reason is that racial discrimination has, indeed, become more of an issue as new immigrants are increasingly drawn from visible minority groups that are more vulnerable to racism. At least three out of four new immigrants are visible minorities, virtually double the proportion in the mid-1980s.

The lack of recognition, or undervaluation, of foreign credentials and skills by employers also plays a significant role. Whatever the reason for our failure to fully utilize human capital, it is a costly one. Jeffrey Reitz, a sociologist and professor of industrial relations at the University of Toronto, estimates that the net loss to immigrants and to the Canadian economy of this brain waste is several billion dollars a year. Visible minorities earn between 15 to 25 per cent less than most immigrants of European origin, whether in skilled or unskilled labour markets.

What do these numbers mean for Canada's future? According to the latest census figures, immigrants are our future. Immigrants are expected to account for virtually all of the net growth in the Canadian labour force by the year 2011.

Faced with a potential labour shortage, our government has responded by raising the standards for immigration even higher. As long as the dual issues of accreditation and discrimination are not adequately addressed through sound policy initiatives, we will not benefit from our immigration policy because an immigrant's education and skills will not be put to good use.

Consider that even in the early 1990s, when Canada's technology industry was demanding new talent, between 1991 and 1994, 10,279 immigrants arrived in Canada listing civil, mechanical, chemical or electrical engineering as their profession. However, by 1996, only half of those immigrants were practising their professions. In short, there is a disconnection between what Canada sets out to do in its immigration policy and the reality facing new immigrants upon their arrival.

Ratna Omidvar of Toronto's Maytree Foundation sums it up by saying:

...we can't be pro-immigration without being pro-immigrant. We want immigration to fuel our economy but would rather not deal with immigrants, especially if they are not white.

Highly skilled immigrants represent a tremendous windfall to Canada. We have not paid a cent for their education and training and we can benefit from their skills during their prime working years. By not taking advantage of their skills, we are losing ground in the global economy.

There has been much rhetoric about the brain drain from Canada to the United States because of higher salaries and lower taxes. It is particularly ironic that a lack of equality of access to employment, and the frustration that this engenders, has become a significant factor in the loss of some of our best minds to our neighbour to the south.

A large part of the responsibility rests with employers. According to a recent CBC report, employers rate foreign education as valued at half of that of a Canadian education and foreign work experience at zero.

It is important that public institutions set an example for the private sector in developing strategies to fully reflect Canada's diversity. After all, one of the benefits of a multicultural society is that we have attracted some of the best minds in the world to our country. Let us develop concrete and specific methods to utilize this strength.

I should like to start with our universities. On paper, most universities, like the public sector, are committed to employment equity. In fact, many universities have signed the Federal Contractors Program that allows them to bid on government contracts, in which they made a commitment to implement employment equity through goals and timetables for the hiring of groups designated as disadvantaged: women, visible minorities, Aboriginal peoples and persons with disabilities. In practice, however, change in the faculty makeup of universities has been very slow, despite good intentions expressed on paper. The composition of student bodies has changed to reflect Canadian society as a whole. Many universities now boast a significant percentage of visible minorities in their student populations.

For example, at the University of Toronto, currently 57 per cent of students in undergraduate studies are visible minorities. In March 1991, the University of Toronto approved an employment equity policy with clearly enunciated goals and timetables for achieving them. However, last year, Professor Shah of the University of Toronto noted that between 1991 and 1999, the percentage of visible minorities in tenure-streamed faculty actually declined from 9.7 per cent to 8.7 per cent.

The new president of the University of Toronto since July 2000 is determined to turn things around. Fresh from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or MIT, Dr. Birgeneau sees the need to internationalize the Faculty of the University of Toronto to make it the best in the world. Dr. Birgeneau stresses that the reason for diversity is not to meet quotas, but to further the excellence of the institution. He said:

...the watchword of such recruitment must be excellence, since anything less will only serve to harm the future greatness of the University of Toronto, and the people who populate it. Exceptional people will be drawn to our enterprise precisely because they will feel at home in an academic community that respects and celebrates diversity at all levels, and that gives them the tools to do great work. I believe strongly that this will give us an advantage that can ensure the University of Toronto's ranking among the very top public universities in the world.

Dr. Birgeneau's plan calls for diversity at all levels of the university, from senior administration to the faculty level. According to Dr. Birgeneau, the only way to have the best

faculty is to be proactive. This means searching the world for the best academics to fill the positions. Dr. Birgeneau says that this strategy worked for the Department of Neurosciences at MIT. He said:

There, by hiring on the basis of excellence and excellence alone, we were able to move the Neuroscience department from being strong, but not world class, to being well up among the top ten in North America. In doing this, we made about 15 new appointments. Among this group, the distribution turned out to be approximately 30 per cent white male, 30 per cent female, and 40 per cent visible minority.

Employment equity is also espoused in the public service and numerous goals and timetables have been tabled with some results, but many problems remain. Honourable senators have probably heard of Dr. Shiv Chopra who has been a thorn in the side of Health Canada officials for many years. In August of 2001, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that Dr. Chopra, who is of East Indian descent, was discriminated against because of his ethnicity. Dr. Chopra has been a drug evaluator in the Bureau of Veterinary Drugs for the past 33 years. In 1990, he failed to win a promotion, despite good job evaluations.

Similarly, in the fall of 2001, Dr. Ranjit Perera won a major suit against the Canadian International Development Agency in which he received a promotion and obtained a commitment from CIDA for the hiring and promotion of visible minorities.

These two recent cases highlight the need for a more proactive approach to employment equity, as suggested by Dr. Birgeneau, throughout the civil service.

Visible minorities are underrepresented in the civil service compared to the overall representation in the general population, which stands at 11 per cent. Last year, in the five largest departments of the civil service, they made up 5.2 per cent of the total workforce, less than one half of their representation in the general population. At the deputy and assistant deputy minister level, the percentage was even lower, at 3 per cent.

Change will require more than good intentions on paper, more than targets and more than well-meaning efforts. These factors are important, but they will not be effective without a fundamental change in the corporate culture of the civil service so that top management supports diversity. In this case, the government must take a leadership role by educating these top bureaucrats. As the Honourable Roy McMurtry, Chief Justice of Ontario stressed, change is about individuals. He said:

All the laws in the world and human rights codes count for little if individual citizens are not willing to make a personal commitment to tolerance and fighting bigotry in society...You cannot legislate to what degree a man must love his neighbour, nor even that he must not hate him.

Honourable senators, the current situation that faces many new Canadians has been called a "Canadian-made tragedy" in which, aside from the enormous losses to our economy, we are faced with an incalculable loss in human potential. Bobby Premakamaren, who came here four years ago with a finance degree from Middlesex University in England and five certificates in accounting, knows this well. After sending out

3,000 resumes over the past four years looking for an accounting position —

The Hon. the Speaker *pro tempore*: I regret to interrupt the honourable senator, but her time has expired. Is there a request for more time?

Senator Poy: I would ask for some time.

Hon. Senators: Agreed.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Fernand Robichaud (Deputy Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, I would like to know how long the senator would need to complete her remarks, because sometimes a little time becomes a lot.

[*English*]

Senator Poy: I would like three minutes.

Senator Robichaud: No problem.

Senator Poy: Mr. Bobby Premakamaren now cleans office buildings and apartments. He describes his immigration experience in Canada as a “disaster.”

Our universities, our government and our corporations must create a level playing field for new immigrants and visible minorities. Ultimately, this will come down to fair-minded individuals in management positions taking the lead to develop new models for our institutions so that all Canadians have a chance to contribute to Canada.

Honourable senators, as parliamentarians, we can help these new models to emerge. The current situation surrounding accreditation needs to be clarified so that employers and new Canadians have the information that they need. Hiring must be based on merit, and merit alone.

At the same time, it is of the utmost importance that we continue to educate Canadians about the reality of race. As recent findings about the human genome revealed, humans share 99.99 per cent of the same DNA with one another, which confirms the fact that there is no scientific basis to support the concept of race. Race is socially, not scientifically constructed. Therefore, racism does not make sense.

Honourable senators, next month we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the passage of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It is important for all parliamentarians to take the initiative to support the true meaning of the Charter, which is equality for all Canadians.

As the Chief Justice of Ontario, the Honourable Roy McMurtry said:

The challenge of brotherhood, of an experiment that bursts through the limits of nationalism to embrace people of diverse ways and diverse tongues is what it means to be Canadian.

Honourable senators, the elimination of racism is not just about economics or the law, it is a question of the heart.

On motion of Senator Kinsella, for Senator Andreychuk, debate adjourned.
