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## CONTROVERSY OVER THE HIJAB AND NIQAB

Statement by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Tuesday, June 22, 2010

## THE SENATE

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### CONTROVERSY OVER THE HIJAB AND NIQAB

**Hon. Vivienne Poy:** Honourable senators, when I came to Canada to study at McGill University more than 50 years ago, female students were not allowed to wear slacks to lectures, even on the coldest days of winter.

I never thought that, more than 50 years later, women in Canada would still be told what they can or cannot wear in public by those in authority, whether it is a public servant, a politician, or a family patriarch.

It was not that long ago that the Quebec Soccer Federation refused to allow Muslim girls to wear the hijab when they played soccer because it was ruled unsafe. Yet, it was deemed safe by the Ontario Soccer Association.

More recently, the Government of Quebec proposed a law banning women from wearing the niqab when they are receiving or delivering public services. Both the Canadian Civil Liberties Association and the Anglican Diocese of Montreal oppose this bill, saying that it is counterproductive to the goal of integration. As the Anglican Diocese clearly stated, "Women have the right to refrain from wearing the niqab in Quebec, but the right to choose not to wear such a garment implies the right to wear one, or it is not a right at all."

Canadians object to patriarchal control in which Muslim women are being forced to wear the hijab or the niqab. However, forcing women to remove them is an equally objectionable form of patriarchy and, to quote one of the women, it is as if "someone is asking me to take off my clothes."

Equality is about choice. On many occasions, Muslim women have told me that it is their choice what to wear over their heads and faces. For those who believe that women who wear the hijab or the niqab are victims of oppression, it makes no sense to oppress them further by refusing them access to education or health services.

As long as they are law-abiding citizens and pay their taxes, it is their right to receive public services.

As University of Toronto Professor Clifford Orwin said:

It's the right of every resident of a liberal state to conduct herself as she thinks pleasing to God, on the sole condition that such conduct not violate the rights of others. And while wearing a *niqab* may send some observers into a high dudgeon, it impairs neither their civil interests nor their religious ones.