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HISTORY OF THE CHINESE IN CANADA

Inquiry

Speech by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Tuesday, February 2, 1999

THE SENATE

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HISTORY OF THE CHINESE IN CANADA

INQUIRY

Hon. Vivienne Poy rose pursuant to notice of December 8, 1998:

That she will call the attention of the Senate to the history of the Chinese in Canada.

She said: Honourable senators, I speak today about a group of Canadians who, over a period of 211 years, helped to build this great country. It is the story of the Chinese Canadians. I will start with a mystery story and go on to what happened before and after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923, and to the end of legal discrimination.

The first Chinese arrived in British North America in 1788, brought by John Meares from the Portuguese colony of Macao in South China, where Meares was selling fur pelts to Chinese merchants for use in mandarins' robes. The group consisted of 50 to 70 labourers, carpenters and shipwrights. They arrived in Nootka Sound, Vancouver Island, in early June. While Meares continued trading southward, the Chinese shore party set to work constructing a small schooner, the *North West America*, and building a two-storey fort.

Spain disputed Meares' land grant by virtue of prior discovery, attacked the fort and seized the *North West America* and other ships. The fate of the Chinese carpenters and shipwrights was a mystery. According to some accounts, they were captured by Spaniards and taken to Mexico. Other reports indicated that they lived with the Nootka people, and then moved inland with native wives to begin their own settlement. Whatever the case, within a generation or two their identities were lost. Another 70 years were to pass before the Chinese appeared again in British North America.

Before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923: Despite a decree issued in 1712 by the Ch'ing Emperor K'ang-hsi that anyone who intended to stay abroad should be summoned back and beheaded, the Chinese emigrated en masse by the middle of the nineteenth century because of the population explosion in South China and peasants who had trouble in Guangdong province. Up to 90 per cent of the peasants lost their land. Since there was no industrialization in China, the surplus landless population had to look elsewhere to seek economic opportunities.

With the abolition of the slave trade in Europe, European colonists badly needed labourers to work in their colonies. In China, the declining Manchu government of the Ch'ing Dynasty was forced by the European powers to open treaty ports. The commissioners of Great Britain and France pressed for legislation with respect to the emigration of coolie labour. In order to stop the kidnapping of Chinese men by coolie crimps along the coast of Guangdong, emigration was regulated. However, the kidnapping continued.

The discovery of gold in California, and later in British Columbia and Australia, gave great impetus for Chinese men to emigrate. In the first eight months of 1850, 50,000 Chinese men emigrated to California. In 1858, with news of the discovery of gold along the Fraser River, thousands of Chinese moved north into British Columbia from San Francisco. Those who came as gold miners did not realize that the Chinese were not allowed to work the mines until the white miners had moved on.

In British Columbia, when the individual miners left and the "rush" was over, they were replaced by mining companies, many of them Chinese. Many Chinese also went into service industries for the mining towns. Victoria became the main centre for Chinese immigrants in North America.

At that time, Canada did not exist as a country, and the Chinese, despite discrimination, had the same full legal rights as the white residents. The Aliens Act of 1861 provided that the aliens, resident for three years within the colony who took the oaths of residence and allegiance, had the rights of British subjects.

In 1860, the London *Times* wrote that:

...no distinctions —
— were —
— made against them —
— that is, the Chinese —
— in these colonies... the great bulk of the population is very glad to see them coming into the country...

An article in the *Victoria British Colonist* in 1861 stated:

We have plenty of room for many thousands of Chinamen... there can be no shadow of a doubt but their industry enables them to add very largely to our own revenues...

However, agitation against the Chinese began when B.C. began to experience economic hardships. By 1866, good claims in placer mining were difficult to find, and the Chinese were frequently perceived as competitors who were willing to undercut white miners' wages.

On July 20, 1871, British Columbia became a province of Canada. In its first session after joining Confederation, the province passed an amendment to the Qualifications of Voters Act to disenfranchise Chinese and Indian voters. Even though the Chinese were not removed from the voters' list until 1875, in January 1873 they were prevented from voting in Nanaimo by being physically barred from the polling stations. The *Colonist* applauded the act as sensible, and referred to the Chinese as "heathen" slaves who had no right to stand side by side with other Canadians at the ballot box. This event, honourable senators, happened 13 years after the birth of the first Chinese in Canada.

In May 1873, the first anti-Chinese society was established in Victoria.

Up to the end of the 1870s, the federal government did not heed the anti-Chinese petition from British Columbia. Sir John A. Macdonald told the members of Parliament from British Columbia that if they wanted the railway, they would have to accept Chinese construction workers.

The Leader of the Opposition, Alexander MacKenzie, stated:

...the principle that some classes of human family were not fit to be residents...would be dangerous and contrary to the Law of Nations and the policy which controlled Canada.

Canada had become dependent on the Chinese as a cheap source of labour. Chinese workmen were paid \$1.35 per day, as compared to white workers at \$2 per day.

In order to adapt to a hostile environment, the Chinese mobilized whatever resources were available to them, including remote kinship ties, which helped in their survival in a foreign land, as well as in building ethnic businesses. Chinese culture played an important role in the adaptation and survival of these immigrants in Canada.

Between 1881 and 1884, Chinese labourers were hired to work building the Canadian Pacific Railway. Seventeen thousand Chinese arrived in Canada to fill the severe labour shortage during its completion. Chinese labourers were paid half the wages of white labourers. Railway contractors found them through Chinese companies that recruited them from China, Hong Kong and the United States. Henry Cambie, the surveyor and engineer for the CPR, described them as "trained gangs of rock men, as good as I ever saw."

Chinese labour was indispensable to the economic development of British Columbia, as shown in the royal commission of 1885.

According to Sir Matthew Begbie, Chief Justice of British Columbia:

I do not see how people would get on here at all without Chinamen. They do, and do well, what white women cannot do, and do what white men will not do.... They constitute three-fourths of the working hands about every salmon cannery; they are a very large majority of the labourers employed in gold mines; they are the model market gardeners of the province, and produce the greater part of the vegetables grown here; they have been found to be absolutely indispensable in the construction of the railway....

B.C. politicians were pressing the dominion government to act on what was defined as a public menace, the Chinese. Prime Minister Macdonald frankly told the House of Commons, in 1883:

It will be all very well to exclude Chinese labour when we can replace it with white labour, but until that is done, it is better to have Chinese labour than no labour at all.

This proved that legislative control of Chinese immigration was inevitable the moment the CPR was completed.

Many people died building the railway. On the 350 miles connecting British Columbia to the rest of Canada alone, 700 Chinese people died. This means that two Chinese workers died for every mile of the railway. Life was terrible. Accidents were frequent. Living conditions were so poor that no medical attention was given to the Chinese. Winter was particularly harsh for these men from southern China who were not prepared for the cold. There were reports of epidemics and scurvy killing hundreds along the railway. When work was completed on one section in the Fraser Canyon, Chinese workers were fired, leaving them in destitution, in towns along the tracks.

With the completion in 1885 of the CPR, thousands of Chinese were out of work. Many headed towards the Prairies and Eastern Canada. A thousand went back to China. Most stayed in B.C. In the same year, the federal government passed the Chinese Immigration Act, imposing a \$50 head tax, with few exceptions, on every person of Chinese origin entering this country. The tax was increased to \$100 in 1900.

According to the Royal Commission of 1902 on the question of Chinese and Japanese immigration, it was decided that no head tax was to be imposed on the Japanese, and the head tax on the Chinese was increased to \$500.

From the very beginning until after the Second World War, the Chinese remained marginal in Canadian society. The removal of citizenship rights, their exclusion from immigration and the restrictions on occupational competition were legally sanctioned by the state and were formally institutionalized.

Chinese exclusion had inadvertently benefited many interest groups and became a means for consolidated union organizations, as well as winning political support.

Economic exclusion persisted until well after the Second World War. Opportunities were so limited that the Chinese started their own businesses to make a living and to provide employment for their own people. In 1895, the Chinese Board of Trade was formed in Vancouver.

In 1907, anti-Asian riots swept through Vancouver's Chinatown. The riots occurred when a branch of the Asiatic Exclusion League held a rally on the night of September 27. Speakers at the rally called for a white Canada. The fear of discrimination caused some Chinese to move east at the close of the 19th century. Most who settled in the prairie provinces and Eastern Canada became owners of small businesses and market gardens.

Wherever the Chinese went, discrimination followed. In 1882, a smallpox alarm in Calgary led to the destruction of Chinese laundries by a mob of 300. Over the next few decades, in three provinces, Chinese residents were disenfranchised, and restrictions were imposed on locations of Chinese laundries, while white residents complained that these laundries lowered the value of their properties.

In the Supreme Court appeals case, in 1914, *Quong-Wing v. The King*, on the prohibition of Chinese employees in hiring white women, Judge Davies ruled:

... the word as used in the statute... Chinamen as men of a particular race or blood... whether aliens or naturalized...

During the First World War, Chinese labour was again needed in this country. In 1917, employers in B.C., Alberta and Saskatchewan proposed importing Chinese workers to relieve the labour shortage. In the same year, the War-time Elections Act stripped the Chinese of the right to vote federally. In the final two years of the war, the Chinese employment situation improved and the immigration level increased up to 4,000 annually. Chinese communities prospered.

At the end of the war, there was again alarm among the white population, not only because of the increase in immigration, but also because the Chinese were moving into new occupations, as well as land ownership and farm operations. Even Chinese-owned restaurants that served western-style foods were under attack.

I now turn to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923. By the early 1920s, the Canadian economy was in a recession as a result of the closure of many wartime industries, and war veterans returning looking for work. Again, resentment against the Chinese was high. The Canadian government passed the Chinese Immigration Act, in 1923, which stopped immigration from China for the next 24 years.

When the exclusion act went into effect on July 1, 1923, Dominion Day, Chinese Canadians called it "humiliation day," and refused to have anything to do with Dominion Day celebrations for many years.

During the depression, the Chinese in Alberta received relief payments of \$1.12 a week, less than half the amount paid to the rest of the population in need. Despite that, many prairie farming families owed their lives to the credits given to them by the Chinese store owners in their purchase of daily necessities during those difficult years.

Despite great adversity, the growth of ethnic businesses among the Chinese in the 1920s and 1930s reflected their successful attempt to establish an economic niche by avoiding competition with white workers and businesses.

During the Second World War, 500 Chinese men served in the Canadian army. Some became secret agents serving in the British Special Operations Executive, mainly in South East Asia where they worked behind enemy lines. An example was Douglas Jung, who in 1957 became the first Chinese-Canadian elected to the federal Parliament. Jung was born in Victoria, but his father had to register his birth with the Canadian immigration authorities. He was given a document with the words, "this certificate does not establish legal status in Canada."

When World War II broke out, Jung and his brothers enlisted. While one of Jung's brothers went into Normandy on D-day and another became a pilot with the RCAF, Jung was instrumental in gathering together from across Canada 12 Chinese Canadian soldiers who volunteered to serve in the Pacific. Their operation was so secret that only two senior Canadian officers at Headquarters, Pacific Command, knew of their existence. Their mission was given so little chance of success that it was code-named "Operation Oblivion."

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The group served with great distinction and four of the 12 received military medals for bravery in the field. No other Canadian military formation had received such a high proportion of decorations.

Regarding the end of legal discrimination, at the end of World War II the Chinese Canadian veterans lobbied for the right to be recognized as Canadian citizens. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1947, making it possible for the wives of Chinese Canadians, and their unmarried children under the age of 18, to immigrate to Canada. In the same year, they regained their right to vote. It was only the year before that the Chinese in B.C. were finally allowed to work in the professions as lawyers, accountants and doctors, et cetera.

When the Liberals took office in 1963, it was clear that Canada's immigration policies needed to be reworked to end discrimination. On October 1, 1967, under the government of Lester B. Pearson, a "points system" to Canadian immigration was introduced. This was the beginning of a new era of Chinese entries into this country, and more educated Chinese moved to Canada.

In 1971, the official national policy of multiculturalism was introduced, and Vancouver's Chinatown was designated a historic site. The Immigration Act of 1976, which came into force under Prime Minister Trudeau, further reflected changes in Canada's immigration policy which effectively brought about the end of institutional discrimination in Canada.

However, attitudes are much more difficult to change. In 1979, CTV aired the program, "Campus Give-away," accusing Canadian universities of accepting Chinese students with higher qualifications than white Canadian students, and thereby spaces in the area of higher education were being taken up by "foreign students." The program implied that students who looked Chinese were foreign, regardless of whether they were Canadian born, naturalized or visa students. This program sparked nationwide protests in the Chinese community and led to the formation of the Chinese Canadian National Council in 1984. The council then launched a campaign to get redress from the Canadian government for past payments of the head tax imposed on Chinese immigrants. The CCNC lobbied cabinet ministers and a rally was organized in Ottawa in 1992.

In a letter to six cultural communities, including Jewish, Chinese, German, Indian, Italian and Ukrainian, dated December 14, 1994, Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and the Status of Women, Sheila Finestone, stated that the government would not grant financial compensation for the requests made. However, an announcement was made for the establishment of the Canadian Race Relation Foundation to work towards the elimination of racial discrimination.

Government legislation can only establish legal parameters but has no control in the way people think, despite the fact that, since the 1950s, numerous Chinese Canadians have distinguished themselves in many fields and professions, both nationally and internationally, and Chinese businesses and investments have brought great prosperity to this country. In July, 1995, Deputy Mayor Carole Bell of Markham, Ontario, made inflammatory remarks that the residents of Markham were being driven out by the Chinese and their businesses, which caused great furor in the

Chinese community. Attitudes are difficult to change. The difference today is that when the Chinese move in, property prices go up.

The ancient Chinese book, *The Art of War*, written by Sun Zi approximately 3,000 years ago, said that it is more effective to attack the mind than to attack a city. In the same context,

honourable senators, it is more effective to change people's attitudes towards racial discrimination through education than to change the laws of a country.

As a proud Canadian, I would call upon my honourable colleagues to work together towards this goal.
