



Debates of the Senate

1st SESSION

•

36th PARLIAMENT

•

VOLUME 137

•

NUMBER 155

Plight of Chinese Immigrants on West Coast—Inquiry—Debate Adjourned

Speech by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Thursday, September 9, 1999

THE SENATE

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IMMIGRATION

PLIGHT OF CHINESE IMMIGRANTS ON WEST
COAST—INQUIRY—DEBATE ADJOURNED

Hon. Vivienne Poy rose pursuant to notice of September 7, 1999:

That she will call the attention of the Senate to the plight of Chinese migrants on the B.C. coast.

She said: Honourable senators, there has been a great deal of media attention and public debate this summer over the arrival of three boatloads of Chinese migrants off the coast of B.C. I note that yesterday another ship of similar description was sighted outside Canadian waters.

The mixed reaction of Canadians to the Chinese migrants suggests we need to do a lot of soul searching. Many are calling for a re-evaluation of our country's immigration policies and, indeed, we must do so. There is no doubt that those responsible for the global trafficking in human cargo must be dealt with harshly. Human smuggling must be stopped.

In the situation before us, it is important for Canadians to understand the plight of these migrants. These are simple, poor people who have been lured by members of the underworld into a dangerous voyage across the ocean by the promise of a better life.

The comparative wealth and freedom we have in this country makes it nearly impossible to appreciate what it means to have nothing or to be persecuted. We need only to see the conditions aboard these vessels that brought the Chinese migrants here to appreciate their desperation. Without compelling circumstances, no one would agree to risk his or her life on an unseaworthy boat lacking even basic sanitation.

Unfortunately, by getting on these boats, these migrants have become the indentured labourers of organized crime. Some of them will undoubtedly have legitimate refugee claims. As an example, in 1987, 2,000 Turks arrived in Montreal by boat. Some were found only to be economic migrants and were returned to Turkey. Others were found to be legitimate refugees. This is only one example of many boats entering Canada carrying people without proper documentation.

We will not know which of these Chinese migrants are legitimate refugees until they are given the opportunity to present their cases. We know that 39 of those on the second boat were unaccompanied children, some as young as 11 years old. Only desperate parents would risk their children's lives on a 60-day journey across the ocean in leaky boats.

Without the help of the Canadian government, the migrants are kidnapped and forced into slave labour, prostitution, and the like. This is how they pay back the estimated U.S. \$40,000 to

U.S. \$50,000 owed to the so-called "Snakeheads" for their passage. Interest rates of 900 per cent have been reported in the media. Those who cannot pay risk being terrorized by the gangs or having their families terrorized in China. U.S. immigration officials have reported cases of rape and dismemberment where individuals have failed to repay their debts.

I have had calls from sympathetic Canadians, many not of Chinese origin, asking me to help these migrants. Hearing their plight reminds me of stories of early Chinese immigrants who came to Canada as indentured labourers. Unfortunately, the kind of prejudice that dogged early Chinese immigrants is evident in some sectors of Canadian society today. To be poor is not a crime, and those victimized should be helped.

Some Canadians have referred to these migrants as "criminals." Even the children have been restrained with metal handcuffs. Girls as young as 12 have been subjected to strip searches. Young children have been needlessly separated from their mothers in detention. Allegations of physical abuse, especially of the children, by RCMP officers have left the Montreal-based Canadian Council for Refugees to call for an independent investigation.

I am distressed to read reports of Canadians calling for the immediate deportation of these migrants, even before they have had an opportunity for proper hearings. A few days ago, the Chinese government said these people should be immediately deported back to China for re-education. However, these migrants are in Canada now, and our understanding of human rights will be the one to prevail.

As a signatory of the 1948 United Nations Convention on Human Rights, the UN 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 protocol, Canada defines protection *de facto* as a fundamental human right. Our immigration regulations and laws reflect fairness and humanity. We allow those who seek help the opportunity to present their cases.

It is important to point out that these recent migrants account for only 1 per cent of people who come to Canada each year without proper documentation and claim refugee status. If they had come from Europe, I wonder if they would have been referred to as "criminals" by some in Canadian society.

There have been charges in the media that these migrants are a burden to society. However, it has been statistically proven that, despite the initial economic outlay from the government, immigrants use less of our health care and welfare services than those born in Canada. Recent Canadian-based data shows that immigrant households from Asia outperform their European counterparts. According to one of Canada's leading economists, the typical migrant family will put \$40,000 to \$50,000 more into the public treasury over a lifetime than they consume in services.

Before we judge these migrants guilty as criminals and a burden on society, we urge all Canadians to reflect on our history

and identity. With the exception of aboriginal Canadians, we are all here because at some point we, or someone before us, immigrated to this country. Many of us are here today because our ancestors came to Canada as economic migrants, not political or war refugees. They simply wanted the chance for a better life. Our country has been built by economic migration. Immigration is an investment in human capital. It is not only a good investment, but also an ethical one.

Honourable senators, I hope that the goodwill of Canadians

will prevail. The Department of Citizenship and Immigration should be allowed to complete these hearings before we determine the worthiness of the migrants' applications to stay in Canada. Otherwise, a dangerous precedent will be set, taking us a step backward, and that will affect the future of this country.

On motion of Senator Robertson, for Senator Carney, debate adjourned.

The Senate adjourned until tomorrow at 9 a.m.
