

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

A Decade of Achievements - Celebrating Asian Canadian Heritage

North York Central Library - Pan Asian Celebration

May 10, 2012

Good evening friends:

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. Before I begin, I would like to thank the Toronto Public Library for collaborating on this program for Asian Heritage Month, as well as for the many years you have held Asian Heritage Month events that bring the community together at the Toronto Public Libraries.

Libraries in many cities across Canada have recognized the importance of celebrating Asian Heritage Month over the years. In so doing, our libraries are recognizing the diversity that is in our communities, in our schools, and on our streets.

Ten years ago, the Department of Canadian Heritage unveiled the official declaration, recognizing the month of May as Asian Heritage Month in Canada.

How did this declaration come about? Well, in May 2001, I was invited to attend an event in Calgary to celebrate Asian Heritage Month, organized by Chinese Calgarians. There was a lot of enthusiasm, but I wondered why there weren't other Canadians there. I looked into the matter when I returned to Ottawa, and discovered that while the month-long celebration was established many years ago in the United States, only a few Canadian communities knew anything about it. That seemed to me rather strange, since I knew that Asians make up a greater proportion of the Canadian population than they do in the U.S..

I realized that Black History Month was officially recognized by the federal government, and wondered why Asian Canadians had been overlooked.

Through Asian Heritage Month, I saw an opportunity for all Asian Canadians to learn about one another, and for the mainstream to learn about all of us, so I put forward a Motion in the Senate of Canada that same year, that May be recognized as Asian Heritage Month. It passed unanimously before the Christmas recess, and then the real work started. It was a matter of convincing the Minister of Canadian Heritage of the importance of its recognition by the federal government. I was fortunate that the government of the day was Liberal, and I had a good working relationship with Sheila Copps, who was the Minister at the time.

I have brought a copy of the Declaration with me, which I signed 10 years ago, alongside then Minister of Canadian Heritage, Sheila Copps, Minister Claudette Bradshaw, myself and a couple of MPs. It reads:

“Diversity represents one of Canada’s greatest strengths, and we strive to ensure that all Canadians have the opportunity to reach their full potential and participate in Canada’s civic life. Over the last two centuries, immigrants have journeyed to Canada from East Asia, Southern Asia, Western and Southeast Asia, bringing our society a rich cultural heritage representing many languages, ethnicities and religious traditions.

The people of this diverse, vibrant and growing community have contributed to every aspect of life in Canada — from the arts and science to sport, business, and government.

Asian Heritage Month offers all Canadians an opportunity to learn more about the history of Asian Canadians and to celebrate their contributions to the growth and prosperity of Canada. Thereby, we declare May as Asian Heritage Month in Canada.”

I would like to present this historical document to the Library, together with an official copy of the final speech before my Motion was put to a vote in Dec. 2001.

Today, cities across the country including Charlottetown, Halifax, Fredericton, Saint John’s, Miramichi, Moncton, Montreal, Ottawa, Peterborough, Toronto, Winnipeg, Brandon, Calgary, Edmonton, Kelowna and Vancouver have their month long celebrations. There is so much enthusiasm that some cities start in April and end in June.

Despite the fact that many cities started their celebrations 10 years ago, I want to point out that Vancouver’s is the largest, and Montreal’s is the oldest. Their celebrations predated the federal recognition, which gave them more credibility, publicity and greater access to funding from different levels of government. There are many new partnerships made between community and arts groups, with universities, colleges and schools. Municipal governments and even the police have come on-board to support the community’s efforts.

At the time I delivered the speech in the Senate to propose Asian Heritage Month in Canada, I said that the effect of the motion would be largely symbolic, but I was wrong. It has been hugely significant for Asian Canadians in Canada, and I think it was also necessary and timely, because in the last 30 years, the majority of immigrants to Canada are from Asia.

Today, as the United States and the European Union are threatened by economic turmoil, the success of Asian economies such as India and China are increasingly highlighted in the media. In this global environment, we recognize our fundamental interdependence. Our environment, our financial institutions and our trade are closely tied to events that occur in distant countries.

Remember the earthquake in Japan – in addition to the devastating effects on a population, the earthquake and tsunami raised fears about global issues such as climate

change, and the safety of nuclear energy. It also had an immediate impact on many industries and economies, which were dependent on Japan in some measure for part of their global supply chain. And Canadians who watched the incredible image of the tsunami knocking aside cars, and toppling buildings, felt the ripples of fear, particularly along our Pacific coast.

In this world that is increasingly porous, Asian Heritage Month, which emphasizes the importance of cross-cultural engagement, is an opportunity for us to embrace new perspectives, and move outside our comfort zone.

All of us are immigrants to Canada, and this represents a tremendous opportunity. In Toronto, as you know, our diversity is astonishing. Over 140 languages and dialects are spoken here, and a little over 30 per cent of Toronto residents speak a language other than English or French at home. About 50% of the population was foreign born as of the 2006 census.

Besides the fact that more than 10% of the Canadian population is of Asian heritage and this number is growing rapidly because of our immigration, now close to 10% of Canadians also live and work abroad.

Somehow, I know we are doing something right because *The Economist's* cover recently featured the headline "The Magic of Diasporas", and called our communities "the one bright spark in the world economy". They argued that diaspora networks of kinship and language make it easier to do business across borders. There are whole nations of interconnected people that exist outside political borders. The internet, informal networks, inexpensive and rapid travel, and trust are the currency of exchange. As more and more of the diaspora move freely between countries, they spread ideas, and build relationships which act as catalysts for new ventures.

Many of us also establish businesses in our adopted countries. Instead of taking the status quo for granted, we often see what is missing, and strive to fill the void. As the diaspora population grows, we also bring in products from elsewhere in the world in response to local demand.

With this unique outlook and the propensity to excel in the sciences and technology, our Asian diaspora community is one of Canada's best assets in terms of its potential for innovation.

Only a few years ago, most Asian food was novel and strange. Very few people ate sushi, or knew what kimchi was. Now, Loblaw owns T&T, the largest Asian grocer, and grocery giant Metro, from Quebec, owns Adonis, frequented by Mediterranean and Middle Eastern consumers. And the majority of restaurants in Toronto serve a version of Asian cuisine.

At No Frills grocers in Toronto, you can now purchase cassava roots, okra, bitter melon, and frozen desserts such as gulab jamun and rasamalai. Yoga is now taught in

some schools as part of Phys-Ed class, alongside spinning. So, has the celebration of Asian heritage influenced these modifications in Canadian culture? I would think so.

Our vibrant Asian diaspora population is Canada's competitive advantage, as the world shifts from focusing on the U.S. to emerging markets – the largest being in Asia. Our multicultural policy encourages us to maintain our ancestral, ethnic and cultural ties while simultaneously being a part of Canada. It's a difficult balancing act sometimes, and it's not always easy to resolve conflicts. But overall, multiculturalism, at its best, brings people together, as it does during Asian Heritage Month. It connects us to others around the world, and makes us better, more engaged citizens.

Since we are in a library, I would like to stress the importance of our writers in making Asian Heritage Month move from being a concept on a page, to being a lived reality. Whether writing fiction or non-fiction, our writers are able to convey the many challenges faced by Asian Canadian immigrants in a visceral way. By engaging with the reader on an emotional level, and telling our stories, writers are our best educators.

A good example of a writer who is an active educator is one of the organizers of tonight's event, librarian Arlene Chan. She has recently published a book about the Chinese in Toronto called *The Chinese in Toronto from 1878: From Outside to Inside the Circle*. The title is interesting and points to the journey Chinese Canadians have made from being outsiders, literally living in ghettos, to being a vibrant and active community in many urban centres.

Asian Canadian writing used to exist on the margins, but now there are so many prominent writers, of both fiction and non-fiction, whose stories span the decades and the continents, that I think many Canadians are absorbing different perspectives, and unique stories, through their works. I believe that these stories should be in the general curriculum in our schools.

Over the years, I have had the pleasure of watching Asian Canadians, who were underrepresented in the sphere, surging to the top of their fields. In the realm of sports, Patrick Chan, the renowned Canadian figure skater, is being followed by Nam Nguyen, a 13 year old Vietnamese Canadian boy who skated against the men recently in New Brunswick. Patrick is Nam's role model. In Canada's national sport, hockey, Asian Canadians are finally coming into their own with several Asian Canadians in the NHL currently including Zachary Yuen, Paul Kariya, Devin Setoguchi, Richard Park and Manny Malhotra. The sport is so popular among the South Asian community that there is a Punjabi version of Hockey Night in Canada.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of global awareness, I have often spoken during the past ten years about the importance of Asian Canadians assuming positions of leadership. In this regard, we have seen some very notable successes over the past decade.

Most recently, the last election brought the most diverse Parliament we have ever had in the history of Canada. We have doubled the new MPs of Asian heritage. Last week, one of these new MPs, Rathika Sitsabaiesan, the first MP of Sri Lankan heritage, spoke at the Parliamentary Breakfast that I host for high school students in the Ottawa-Carleton Region. It is important to see MPs on the Hill representing the diversity of Canada.

We have also seen the election of Naheed Nenshi as Mayor of Calgary. He is one of the most popular mayors in the country even more than a year after his election.

But the news is not all good. Where there are significant populations of Asian Canadians, as there are here in Toronto, there are still far too few Asian Canadians serving on municipal councils. If we are to have a role in shaping our city, we need to see better representation at this level.

So, ten years after the official declaration of May as Asian Heritage Month, we are seeing the relevance and importance of Asian Canadians in all aspects of Canadian life. As our visible minority population continues to grow, and change, in our urban centres, I hope that Asian Heritage Month will continue to offer a focal point so as to educate and inform Canadians from all backgrounds about the contributions of Canadians of Asian heritage to our country.

Happy 10th anniversary of Asian Heritage Month.

Thank you.