

Calling Canada Home | Creating a sense of belonging through community activism

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen:

‘Calling Canada Home’ is the title of my speech tonight, and it is also the title of my PhD thesis a number of years ago. My research was on immigrant Chinese women to Canada from the very beginning, from 1860 to 1990. What I discovered is that for immigrants, home is where we choose to be. Home is more than just a place to live - it is also where we feel comfortable. That is what I would like to speak on this evening in reference to New Brunswick.

Many of you are aware that New Brunswick and Canada are facing a declining population due to a low birth rate, out-migration and an aging population. On a global scale, we see similar situations in many developed countries. Consider that between 2001 and 2006, only 400,000 babies were born in Canada, but 1.2 million immigrants arrived here. So, our population, as well as our labour force, are boosted by immigration.

As a province, New Brunswick’s birth rate is lower than the national average, while the median age of its population is also older. What does this mean for the province? It means that it needs to have specific policies to attract productive immigrants and skilled professionals – entrepreneurial individuals who will meet the labour and market demands, and spur population and economic growth in the province. Due to the fact that labour is increasingly mobile, both in Canada and around the world, the competition for the best and the brightest is fierce.

The good news, from the 2006 Census is that New Brunswick’s population edged up very slightly from the 2001 count, although the province had a net loss of close to 11,000 people over the same five-year period. Without a doubt, the population increase was due to the 4,000 immigrants who arrived in the province since 2001.

The foreign-born population of New Brunswick now accounts for almost four per cent of the total population. In the entire country, the foreign born population is now at its highest in 75 years, at almost 20 per cent of the total population.

Unlike in the rest of Canada, most of the new immigrants to New Brunswick are from the U.S., with China and South Korea being the other two major source countries. However, the major challenge remains in retention. How can New Brunswick keep immigrants from leaving the province for opportunities elsewhere in the country or abroad?

Clearly a strategy is needed to attract immigrants to the province and retain them, and the government of New Brunswick is moving in this direction. New Brunswick has established a Provincial Nominee Program to attract skilled workers, entrepreneurs and investors. It has also developed a Population Growth Strategy release just this year to increase immigration by 5,000 by 2015. However, much more needs to be done.

One of the major obstacles to attracting, and retaining immigrants in the province, is the lack of a sense of belonging to the province by recent immigrants. Since most immigrants settle in large

cities such as Toronto, where there is a significant existing population of immigrants, New Brunswick needs to foster an environment where immigrants recognize themselves. A good recent example from another province is Manitoba's successful programme to attracting Filipino immigration to Winnipeg, where there is already a very active Filipino community, and I will come back to this later.

Every province needs to follow its own path, and New Brunswick can celebrate the unique features of the region, and support the immigrant communities that are already established here, and help them to grow.

Pluralistic communities are an important part of helping immigrants to feel at home. Considering that our major immigration source countries are in Asia, one of the ways New Brunswick can welcome newcomers is to support the newly formed Asian Heritage Society of New Brunswick. For a number of years, my friend Madhu Verma of Fredericton has been organizing celebrations in this province, and this year the Society has incorporated, attracting new members, and expanding its reach here in Saint John. Through the Society's exhibit, which this year focuses on the Japanese Canadian community, cultural gala evening, and film showings, New Brunswick residents, from every background, have a chance to get to know more about the communities within their communities.

Another avenue for creating a sense of belonging is through multicultural education in the schools. I believe the poorest people in the world are those without imagination. Our students need to learn to think creatively in terms of their future, and to imagine that anything is possible. They need to know that in a country like Canada, their heritage is an asset. It is only when they learn to be proud of their heritage, and comfortable in their own skins, that they can make the most of the endless possibilities available to them as part of the Canadian experience.

For immigrants to feel welcome, they need to have their unique stories recognized in the school curriculum. Last year, I attended the first Asian Heritage Month Education Roundtable at St. Thomas University in Fredericton to discuss how multicultural education could be integrated into the curriculum in New Brunswick. Representatives from the Department of Education of New Brunswick were there, and the feeling was that community involvement in education was welcome.

We have had four of these Education Roundtables at the University of Toronto, one of which involved the current Minister of Education for Ontario, Kathleen Wynne. The Toronto District School Board has also embraced programming for Asian Heritage Month, offering its students the opportunity to engage in seminars and celebrations throughout the month of May.

As members of our communities, we must continue to advocate for education in our schools because it is the younger generation who will decide our future. Students need to be encouraged to view their background as an asset and not a burden. And the way they think about themselves will largely depend on the message they get in their schools. It's very important that all students feel included, and know that their heritage and their celebrations are part of being Canadian. It has been proven that when students' cultures are validated, they feel accepted, and they do better in school and in life.

For this kind of education to work in practice, we need teachers with proper training to bring the community into the classroom. I was very excited to read about the Urban Diversity programme being offered by York University in Toronto for teachers in training. Half the class of 70 is comprised of those underrepresented in the teaching profession – visible minorities, foreign trained teachers, the disabled and aboriginals - so students may have a chance to learn from someone who reflects them, and in this way, teachers can serve as mentors to their students. These student teachers are asked to look at their own biases, and examine their own heritage so they know the prejudices they carry with them as they enter the classroom. Finally, part of their job is to involve parents and the community in the schools. While this approach requires extensive training, it has the potential to transform the way in which community groups interact with the education system.

For groups like the Asian Heritage Society of New Brunswick, this kind of community-oriented education offers them a central role in educating both schoolchildren, and adults, about the diversity of cultures in this province. They can help to enhance communication between newcomers and the host population, and help to educate the community about our source countries for immigration, dispelling myths, and creating understanding. I would hope that the Society can also contribute to the development of educational materials for the Atlantic Canada Portal, a unique website devoted to research related to the Atlantic Provinces and maintained by the University of New Brunswick.

Beyond education in the schools, there is education in the media. The media has a very real role to play in shaping people's perceptions about the world we live in. This is why I am very happy to highlight the CBC, which now has a website dedicated to Asian Heritage Month, with links to Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal. I do hope Fredericton and Saint John will develop a partnership with the CBC next year, since it has made Asian Heritage Month a part of its strategy for promoting diversity.

In Calgary, the *Calgary Herald* supports Asian Heritage Month by providing a complete insert devoted to the activities being held during May. I understand Fredericton's *Daily Gleaner* has been very supportive as well. Making these links with the media is crucial for raising awareness about the diversity of our communities, as well as issues of concern.

Aside from exposing people to different cultures, in order to expand individuals' knowledge of the world, there is sometimes a need for a more direct approach to community activism and engagement. A number of years ago, the PanAsian Canadian Network Against Racism was formed, and they have held two Conferences, in 2002 and in 2005, as well as a number of events to tackle racism, particularly as it affects Asian Canadians.

Currently, this may not seem very significant in Saint John, despite the disturbing racial incidents last summer. After all, the total visible minority population is only just over 3,000, and in New Brunswick, it is just over 13,000. The largest visible minority community here in Saint John is Black, followed by Chinese then South Asian. But, I think the incidents last summer involving the students and the City Councillor should be recognized for what they are. They suggest that conflicts can increase as New Brunswick responds to the demographic crunch.

In reference to the same topic, I want to touch briefly on the report from the Quebec Commission on the issue of “reasonable accommodation,” which came out last week amid much controversy. It seems relevant to our discussion today. Some in the media have suggested that the reasonable accommodation debate in Quebec affects all communities in Canada by influencing the way we view multiculturalism.

I don’t know if you remember how it all started. In January, 2007, the town of Herouxville, Quebec, a little village of 1,300 only 100 miles north-east of Montreal, with only one immigrant family, passed a number of laws, banning, among other things, the stoning of women! They said women should be allowed to drive, vote, dance, and Sikh children were banned from carrying ceremonial daggers to school, even though the Supreme Court has ruled that they can. There seemed to be no catalyst for the passage of the laws in this little town.

Shortly after this controversy, there were a number of incidents, some of which focused on the wearing of the hijab in sports in Quebec - an 11-year-old girl was ejected from an indoor game of soccer in a tournament in Quebec, and five young girls were kicked out of a tae kwon do tournament.

The Premier of Quebec felt there was a need to consult with the public, and have a more informed discussion about what constituted “reasonable accommodation.” So, he set up the Taylor-Bouchard Commission to hold hearings around the province, and prepare a report. Over the course of provincial hearings last fall, many of the most strident and racist comments were reported in the media. Some suggested the debate was a useful one for all provinces in Canada to engage in.

The problem for me was that there was no clear explanation in the media of what was meant by the term “reasonable accommodation.” For one thing, who determines the norm? After all, as a woman, I am aware that less than 100 years ago, I couldn’t vote in this country. That was the norm then, but countries’ norms do evolve. After all, what’s “reasonable”? I am sure women were considered “unreasonable” when they demanded the vote.

Nevertheless, having read the final report of the Commission, I think its recommendations do offer guidance to other provinces without the need for divisive debate. The report concludes that the Canadian multicultural model does not appear to be well suited to conditions in Quebec. It recommends that interculturalism be considered as an alternative, strongly recommending greater intercommunity interaction, and an acceptance by the Québécois of the fact that, communities in Quebec will eventually be transformed through this dialogue.

The Report also accepts the notion of multiple identities, and encourages multilingualism. It goes on to say that: “Constant interaction between citizens of different origins leads to the development of a new identity and a new culture.”

Interestingly, the final report recommends the negotiation of identities and intercultural dialogue which I have been recommending for many years. Encouraging communication between different groups of Asian Canadians and mainstream society is the underlying reason for Asian Heritage Month. Interculturalism is necessary, not only for Quebec, but for all of Canada,

particularly when Statistics Canada has predicted that labour force growth may be entirely dependent on immigration by 2011, and that is just three years away. I also echo the Report's optimistic conclusion that the younger generation of Canadians is ready to embrace interculturalism.

As many of you no doubt remember, last summer, two Chinese foreign students who attended the University of New Brunswick's Saint John campus, were beaten. Following the event, a Korean Canadian, who is a Saint John City Councillor, had death threats levelled at him. There was also racist graffiti scrawled across a bus shelter.

While the series of incidents last summer are rare, they highlight the need for communities and government to counteract racism wherever possible. The vast majority of people are welcoming, and the few racists who would perpetuate such terrible acts must be targeted and isolated. These incidents were particularly unfortunate as they targeted foreign students. The University has had a major drive to attract foreign students since 1999, and now 20 per cent of the students at the Saint John campus of the UNB are Chinese. These incidents may have been very damaging to their marketing efforts.

To the universities, these foreign students also represent an important source of revenue. Since the Deputy Minister of Education of New Brunswick, John Kershaw, stated in 2005, that international education is "a pillar and an important link to pursuing prosperity in New Brunswick," more effort must be made to attract foreign students and retain graduates in the province.

Foreign students are important to any province because they offer a ready source of labour, particularly if they elect to stay in the province once they have completed their studies. Since they are acculturated and established in the province, with friends, and sometimes, family, they make perfect residents.

As is often the case, in the racial incidents I mentioned earlier, something positive came out of the negative events last year. Saint John endorsed the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination's 10 common commitments (CMARD), and has agreed to develop and implement a plan of action to counter racism and discrimination. The city will also establish a welcoming centre to help immigrants find the resources they need to settle here. The Saint John Police Department has agreed to establish a closer relationship with the University, and I hope that it will also work closely with community groups, and engage in dialogue with the Asian Canadian community here.

The next important item to help immigrants feel at home is jobs – good jobs for both foreign graduates, and for immigrants arriving from overseas. As you know, every province in Canada has a problem with the underemployment of immigrants. New Brunswick's Provincial Nominee Program, which mandates that recruits must have a permanent job lined up in the province, and that they intend to settle here is a good way of attracting immigrants.

Again, I want to refer to Manitoba, which in recent years has become the third largest Filipino community in the country, accounting for over five per cent of the total population of Winnipeg

in the last Census. In February, Manitoba's Premier signed an agreement with the Government of the Philippines that will help streamline immigration from that country with immigrants being pre-screened by agencies in the Philippines prior to their arrival in Manitoba. Because of Manitoba's existing Filipino community, immigrants feel welcome in the province and quickly become acculturated.

According to the latest Census figures from 2006, more immigrants are electing to come to New Brunswick. Even more importantly, more of these immigrants are staying in the province, with 75 per cent of them electing to stay after their arrival.

In order to continue moving forward, though, immigrants will need more opportunities. With the global movement of people becoming commonplace, immigrants will not stay unless they are living in an environment where they can work at a level commensurate with their education and training, feel comfortable being surrounded by that which is familiar, and welcomed into the community.

For people to feel welcome, they also need to know that they have a chance to share in the institutional decision making that affects them. Important institutions that have the power to bring about change, such as boards of education, city councils, boards of corporations, and the provincial and federal legislatures must eventually become more reflective of Canada's population.

The significance of such changes was brought home to me when I was appointed to the Senate of Canada 10 years ago. People wrote me from across the country saying how happy they were about my appointment because it made them feel that anything is possible for them in Canada. Even though I was a Senator representing Ontario, I was immediately adopted across the country.

On another level, in Toronto, my friend Mari Rutka's involvement on the Toronto District School Board has meant that Asian Heritage Month educational materials are now integrated into the Board's mandate. As Asian Canadians, and as visible minorities, we can represent our communities' concerns, and make sure that our voices are heard.

Ultimately, this is a question of our identity, and the recognition that it is has evolved over the last few decades, and that it is continuously evolving at a rapid rate. Unlike Europeans, who can speak to age old traditions, being Canadian means negotiating our identity on a continual basis. What are our guidelines? I believe the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms offers us a roadmap. It serves to protect minorities from being oppressed by the majority, protects religious and cultural rights, while ensuring equality under the law for all groups. The negotiation of identity implicitly required by the Charter isn't always easy or straightforward.

To complicate the situation facing minorities in New Brunswick, the issues of identity have often centred on the Acadian history of the province. As a minority population in the province, Acadians have felt the need to struggle for the recognition of their rights. With their unique and troubling story of expulsion and return to the Maritimes, their need for recognition of their history and status in the province is understandable.

Francophones in New Brunswick are the largest minority population, making up about a third of the population in the 2006 Census, and their numbers sometimes dominate the societal discourse, muting the voices of other minorities. New Brunswick is the only officially bilingual province in Canada, so the term biculturalism may surpass multiculturalism in discussions of identity.

Nevertheless, there are a number of other minority groups which have played a significant role in the development of the Maritimes. The Scots and the Irish make up a large part of the original Anglophone population. Among the other groups, the Italians, the Dutch, the Blacks, the Micmac, the South Asians, the Chinese and the Greeks have long ago established their presence in the Maritimes.

Ultimately, I do believe that citizens of Canada need to accept equality for all as contained in the equality provision of Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Beyond this, all Canadians should participate as citizens in their communities, in an ongoing and productive dialogue that respects differences, while recognizing our common values.

Do continue to support education, outreach, community grassroots initiatives, settlement services, and employer education. New Brunswick is noted for its friendly culture, so do open your doors to the world, and embrace all the best it has to offer.

During Asian Heritage Month, let us celebrate the heritage that is part of your history, and an increasingly important part of your future.

This Asian Heritage Month Public Lecture was given by Senator Vivienne Poy at the New Brunswick Museum Theatre, Saint John, New Brunswick, 30 May 2008