

## **Asian Heritage Month Lecture, Prince Edward Island**

Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

First of all, I wish to recognize my colleague, Senator Percy Downe and his wife Roslyn.

I am delighted to be here in the third year of Asian Heritage Month celebrations in PEI. I wish to thank Leticia LaRosa for inviting me, and for being the driving force behind these events.

I understand that you had quite a few festivities last month, with more planned for the month of June. Many of them involve gourmet cuisine, bringing Asian Canadians, and other islanders, together in a shared appreciation of delicious foods from different parts of the world.

Being someone who loves good food, I would say without hesitation that one of the best things about the growing diversity of Canada is the variety of restaurants that have sprung up, in our cities and small towns. Besides, spices and produce from all over the world are now available, allowing us to travel through the world in our kitchens.

This diversity is also increasingly evident in the literature that we find in our bookstores. A few days ago, I had the pleasure of introducing Dr. M.G. Vassanji, a South-Asian Canadian author who has won the Giller Prize twice, at an Asian Heritage Month lecture at the University of Toronto. Last year, the lecturer was Dr. Vincent Lam, a Chinese Canadian originally from Vietnam, who was the winner of the 2006 Giller Prize. Among its various celebrations, Asian Heritage Month events have also showcased numerous other talents across Canada, such as Wayson Choy and the noted movie director and producer, Deepa Mehta.

A few years ago, a cash-strapped Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra turned to Calgary's Asian Heritage Foundation for help, and asked them to hold joint benefit concerts. I was at one of the concerts where the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra (CPO) performed a selection of music, highlighting the cultural themes of the various participating Asian communities. It's important to note that this was the first time the Orchestra had performed a concert of Asian pieces, and it was a new experience for the musicians. Through that collaboration, the Orchestra has found itself with a new audience, and increased sponsorship.

What does this tell us? Asian Heritage Month is a multicultural Festival within Canadian society. It highlights the new face of Canada where Asian Canadians are part of the Canadian landscape.

My first experience with an Asian Heritage Month festival was in Calgary in May 2001. Chinese Calgarians gathered together to celebrate with very little participation from other groups. I thought about the concept of an official Asian Heritage Month, and how it could

be a vehicle for bringing Canadians of different ethnic origins together, and for sharing our cultural heritage with mainstream society.

As Asian Canadians, many of our cultures share commonalities. Over the centuries, our civilizations have influenced one another; religions have evolved and changed, and knowledge has been shared. But here in Canada, groups tend to live separately, rarely interacting with one another. It is time for change.

We just have to look at the latest Census from 2006, which tells us that there are now over five million visible minority people in Canada. And out of this group, half are of South Asian and Chinese heritage. It is clear that the Asian Canadian population is large and growing, as most immigrants to Canada now originate in Asia.

When I introduced the motion in May 2001 in the Senate of Canada to recognize the contributions of Asian Canadians, and their current significance to this country, I was looking to the future of Canada. As a historian by training, I have long recognized that Canada is an immigrant receiving country. And now, due to a decline in birth rate, it is becoming entirely dependent on immigration for the growth in its labour force.

In the United States, May is Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. It was officially designated through legislation in 1990, but a week long celebration actually began in 1978 when President Carter recognized it. One of the main reasons for this recognition was the importance of Asian Americans in building the transcontinental railway.

We, in Canada, often pride ourselves on being multicultural and inclusive, but, when it comes to the contributions of Asian Canadians, it took the federal government a long time to officially acknowledge how important we have been to the development of Canada. As in the United States, the Canadian railway, which united this country, was built on the backs of Chinese labourers.

In Canada, communities began celebrating Asian Heritage Month in 1993, with Montréal and Vancouver establishing grassroots organizations that have thrived for more than a decade. However, there was no official support or recognition as Black History Month had.

When my motion passed in the Senate of Canada to recognize May as Asian Heritage Month in December 2001, I soon discovered that it was just the first step along a very long road. As many of you are no doubt aware, as active community members, nothing ever happens without effort and a real team approach. Fortunately, the former Minister of Canadian Heritage, Sheila Copps, understood the importance of building communities and supporting our cultural heritage, and with her support, a declaration was signed in May 2002 to formally recognize May as Asian Heritage Month.

What has happened since then has been very gratifying. I have watched as Asian Heritage Month celebrations spread across the country, becoming established, and attracting new

members, and participants. Many Canadians have said to me that it is so nice to be able to celebrate together.

It has been truly a grassroots effort with celebrations springing up in the most unlikely places. Last year, Yukon commemorated May as Asian Heritage Month, and an exhibit was held in Whitehorse. And this year, I'm proud to announce, thanks to the efforts of my good friend Madhu Verma of Fredericton, the Asian Heritage Society of New Brunswick was formally established. Also this year, I was invited to visit Saint John to speak about what it means to be Canadian today.

What I said in Saint John, New Brunswick, also applies to PEI. Every province in Canada is trying to attract new immigrants, and if immigrants are going to come here and stay, they must feel that this is a place where they can feel at home. In recent years, our major immigration source countries are in Asia, so Asian Heritage Month celebrations, and similar events, offer immigrants a chance to feel that their heritage is part and parcel of the life here.

My own sense of belonging in Canada stems from the freedom to live a bicultural life that incorporates both my Chinese heritage and Canadian culture. Through Asian Heritage Month, I have had the chance to appreciate so many people who have shared the beauty of their own cultures – their music, performing and visual arts, literature, and even their ideas – with me.

Globalization is here even if you have the good fortune to live on your beautiful island. Asian Heritage Month is a way of opening doors to the world, and travelling while staying at home. I invite you to take this journey with me. To learn from one another, and enjoy all the cultural diversity that Canada has to offer.

Just to let you know how small this world really is, Monica Wu, who is originally from Taiwan, and who started the Ottawa Asian Heritage Month Society, is a friend of Leticia LaRosa, originally from the Philippines, who is the driving force here in PEI. Ultimately, events like this come down to individuals who recognize the value of events to bring Canadians closer. They understand that Canada must evolve as a society to promote intercultural dialogue. Celebrations of Asian Heritage Month open the door to a greater understanding about our complex identity as Canadians.

Enjoy your festivities. Thank you.

*This Asian Heritage Month Lecture was given by Senator Vivienne Poy for Asian Heritage Month celebrations in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, 1 June 2008.*