

Asian Heritage Society of New Brunswick Gala speech

Hon. Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good evening. On behalf of the Senate of Canada, I bring greetings to the City of Fredericton as you celebrate Asian Heritage Month.

I would like to thank my friend, Madhu Verma, for inviting me here tonight. As you all know, she is the driving force behind celebrations in this province, and this year, helped to formally establish the Asian Heritage Society of New Brunswick. She is the kind of person who inspires others with her passion for creating greater understanding between peoples, and building bridges between diverse communities.

I am delighted that I had the opportunity to speak at the New Brunswick Museum Theatre in Saint John yesterday, and tomorrow, I will be heading to Charlottetown. I expect that, in the next few years, thanks to Madhu's efforts, and those of many others, more and more cities in the Maritimes will celebrate the Asian Canadians in their midst.

Our Census of 2006 has certainly highlighted the diversity of Canada today. It pointed to the highest percentage of foreign born Canadians in 75 years, at almost 20 per cent. It also tells us that our visible minority population now stands at over five million, half of whom are from Asia.

While this may be more evident in the streets of Toronto or Vancouver than here in Fredericton, immigration is the key for any province in Canada to increase its prosperity by attracting new labour, new markets, new investment, and most importantly, new ideas. How can Fredericton attract new immigrants? The most important thing it can do is to make immigrants feel at home. Part of laying out the welcome mat is supporting Asian Heritage Month activities.

But celebrating Asian Heritage Month isn't just about attracting new people to the province. It's also about making those of Asian heritage, who have been here for a long time, feel that their contributions to the province, and to the Maritimes, are recognized. Canadian culture as it is expressed in food, visual and performing arts, dance, literature, and even our ideas, is increasingly diverse. The fusion of different peoples from many backgrounds creates a brand new culture that is uniquely Canadian. This helps to make Canada an exciting country to live in.

Asian Heritage Month is a multicultural festival that emerges from Canadian society. It merely highlights the new face of the Canada that we live in today, where Asian Canadians are very much part of the Canadian landscape.

Although grassroots organizations across the country have been celebrating Asian Heritage Month in Vancouver and Montreal since the early 1990s, it was only in May, 2001, that I attended my first Asian Heritage Month festival, and it was in Calgary. Although it was

called “Asian”, it was really a group of Chinese Calgarians gathered together with very little participation from other groups.

When I returned to Ottawa, I wondered why Black History Month was recognized by the federal government and not Asian Heritage Month. When I looked into it, I discovered that in the U.S., the government had recognized it since 1978. So, what was lacking was a champion in Ottawa.

The notion of Asian Heritage Month also made me reflect on Canada’s multicultural model, which typically funds separate organizations, leading to multiculturalism, and not interculturalism. I thought about the concept of 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, and carrying on a dialogue with one another.

When the motion I introduced in the Senate of Canada to recognize May as Asian Heritage Month was passed unanimously in December, 2001, the concept fitted well into 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 declining birth rate, it is becoming entirely dependent on immigrants for the growth in its labour force, the majority of whom are from Asia.

What has happened since 2001 has been very gratifying. I have watched as Asian Heritage Month celebrations spread across the country, becoming established, and attracting new members and participants. It has been truly a grassroots effort carried out by volunteers, with celebrations springing up in the most unexpected places. Last year, Yukon commemorated May as Asian Heritage Month, and an exhibit was held in Whitehorse.

I have watched friendships flourish, and I have made many new friends myself. 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, and literature, with a Canadian twist.

I will give you an example. At one of the events I attended in Toronto this month, called Education Through the Arts, one of the presenters was a South Asian Science teacher who gives dancing lessons to her students outside of class time. Some of her students performed a mixture of Indian, hip hop and modern dance. It was beautiful and fascinating!

My friends, Asian Heritage Month celebrations open doors to the world. I invite you to come along with me, to learn from one another, and enjoy all the cultural diversity that Canada has to offer.

Have a wonderful evening. Thank you.

This Asian Heritage Month Lecture was given by Senator Vivienne Poy at the Asian Heritage Society of New Brunswick Gala, Fredericton, New Brunswick, 31 May 2008