



What does a seat at the table mean to Chinese-Canadians and to Canada?

By Tung Chan

On paper, Canada has committed itself to ensure everyone has a seat at the table for almost forty years. Since 1988 the Multiculturalism Act has mandated our Federal Government to

take measures to encourage and assist the business community, labour organizations, voluntary and other private organizations, as well as public institutions, in ensuring full participation in Canadian society, including the social and economic aspects, of individuals of all origins and their communities, and in promoting respect and appreciation for the multicultural reality of Canada.

So we may expect to see, after forty years of government intervention, employment equity and inclusiveness reflected in all federal institutions, business enterprises, and civil societies. Unfortunately, the reality is that visible minorities—particularly Asian-Canadians—are overwhelmingly under-represented in positions of impact in our society.

***In Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Whole Hearts, Tough Conversations*, Brené Brown argues that there is a positive correlation between inclusivity, innovation, and performance. These are high-sounding academic words. We need to know what such words actually mean in real life. But what does it mean to Canada and to Chinese Canadians to have members of the community gain a seat at the table?**

To answer that question I will draw upon my own experience. I am a Hongkonger who immigrated to Canada almost 47 years ago. When I arrived I was a penniless 22-year-old with only a high school education speaking English with poor grammar and a strong accent.



Over the past 47 years, I was fortunate enough to have sat at many decision-making tables. I sat at the Council Chamber of the City of Vancouver as a Councilor. I sat on the Board of the Civic Non-Partisan Association (NPA) of Vancouver as its president. I sat at the regional executive table of one of the five major banks in Canada as one of its Vice-Presidents. I sat at the board table of the Richmond Public Library, the 911 E-Comm Emergency Communications Incorporation of British Columbia, and the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 as Chair.

So what did I do when I was seated at those tables?

As a Vancouver City Councilor, I advocated that simultaneous translations were provided in public rezoning meetings that affected areas heavily populated by recent HK immigrants. I persuaded the City to hire a media monitoring company to translate Chinese language newspaper articles that were related to city business. I helped secure funding to support the HK festival and funded the replacement of street lamps in Chinatown with dragon-motif extensions. I used my position to bring a group of long-term Anglo Shaughnessy South residents and their new Chinese neighbours together to solve a controversial rezoning dispute. But the one initiative I am most proud of is when I successfully persuaded the *Vancouver Sun* and *Mingpao*, a Chinese-language newspaper, to co-publish editorials in translation.

When I was the president of the NPA, I recruited Chinese-Canadian candidates to run, for the first time in Vancouver's history, for all three levels of civic government of Vancouver: Council, School Board and Park Board. This action forced the main opposition party to also recruit Chinese-heritage candidates to run in municipal elections. I also started the practice of assigning official domesticated Chinese-names to politicians who do not have a Chinese name. This practice makes it easier for Chinese-speaking voters to identify candidates and eliminate the confusion that



occurs when candidates are labelled with different names by different Chinese-language news outlets.

When I was the Vice-President of one of Canada's major banks, I advocated that branches provide services in Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, and Japanese. That same bank's ATMs now have three languages—in addition to English and French—from which customers can choose. I helped adopt lending policies that were more friendly to new immigrants without a Canadian credit history. I helped created and sat on the HR Diversity Council.

When I was the Chair of the Richmond Public Library Board, I provided strong support to the Chief Librarian in adding more Chinese-language books to shelves. The library, under the leadership of the Chief Librarian, added Chinese-language movies and Cantonese music CDs to its collections. With my help, the library obtained a provincial grant and private sector donations to purchase new computers and software, creating a language lab where new immigrants can learn to speak English.

When I was Chair of the 911 E-Comm Emergency Communications Incorporation, I ensured call operators had access to translators in real-time for when callers were not English speakers. Now, when callers state, in English, the name of the language that they speak, a translator will be connected almost instantaneously to provide simultaneous translation.

As Chair of the Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, I made sure that the racist history of this country was not glossed over. When visiting the museum, guests now see the history of the Chinese Head Tax prominently featured in the entrance area. On one wall of the exhibition hall visitors are met with a mural-size picture of the dejected faces of South Asians standing on the *Komagata Maru*; on the opposite



wall is a similarly-sized photograph of happy Dutch immigrants being welcomed by Canadian immigration officers. In order to break the stereotypical view of immigrants from developing countries, I persuaded the curators to also include American Vietnam War-era conscientious objectors in the display panels.

But those initiative are countered with a few stories of when I was not at the table or when there were not sufficient supporters.

My original intention for simultaneous translation at 911 E-Comm was to create a hiring policy where preference was given to applicants who were fluent in one of the three non-official languages spoken by the most residents in Metro Vancouver. That motion failed because one of the supporters of the motion left the meeting early and missed the matter on the agenda.

There is also the ongoing issue of limited institutional recognition for internationally-trained professionals. For years, many well-qualified new immigrants have been confronted by this issue. There is an insurmountable barrier facing internationally-trained doctors and nurses to have their credentials recognized in BC even as the province is in dire need of health professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic. This problem is not new, for decades this has held back new immigrants. The issue has not been solved because there have not been a sufficient number of people with an immigrant's perspective sitting at the self-regulating body's decision-making table.

As another example, as far as I know Canadian Blood Services does not accept donors who are unable to answer their health questionnaire in either English or French and potential donors are not allowed the use of an interpreter. This artificial barrier, based on unproven assumptions, has denied many new Canadians the opportunity to contribute to their community. I believe if there is a sufficient number



of people from the recent immigrant community sitting at the decision-making table of the Canadian Blood Services, a different policy outcome is possible.

Each of these examples, both from my own experience and from a wider perspective, demonstrates how much impact can be had by a single voice. We need to have more Chinese Canadians sitting at more decision tables.