AN INTERVIEW WITH MARLENE JENNINGS

Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister with special emphasis on Canada-U.S.



1. How important is your identity to you and how does it express itself in your daily life and career?

My identity is very important to me. It forms the basis of my very core. I am a Black Canadian woman of diverse ethnic origins, a proud Quebecer and Anglophone! However my self-identity is much more complex than that; I am also a wife, a mother, a sister, a friend. How I think of issues is shaped by my personal history, past and present. In day-to-day life, the manner in which my identity will express itself will and is determined by the set of circumstances with which I am confronted. For example, when the four terrorist bombs went off in London last month, the part of my self-identity that is that of being a member of a family superseded that of race and colour. My first thoughts went to my sister, nephew and brother-in-law who reside in London, and I immediately emailed my sister, asking if she and her family were okay. It was only after I'd received assurances from my sister that all was well with her family that the parts of my identity relating to race and colour began to kick-in and I began to wonder about the race of the terrorists and whether this time we'd see involvement from Black Africa. As for my professional life/career, my identity has played a significant role in choices I have made about job offers. Had I not been a Black Quebecker, I do not think I would have accepted the appointment to the Quebec Police Commission in 1988. It was a time when Quebec in general and Montreal in particular were experiencing serious issues regarding race relations between our police services and the Black communities. It had become clear to all who had extensively studied the situation that public policies on policing had to change. I felt that as a Black Quebecker, I could have a positive impact on those policies and on the type of policing required in an increasingly ethnically and racially diverse society.

2. Canada and the U.S. differ greatly with respect to how each country integrates immigrants. The United States has often been described as a melting pot, while Canada has been known for its more multicultural, cultural mosaic approach. Do you think that distinction still holds true? If so, in what ways?

I do think and believe that the distinction between Canada and the United States' integration of immigrants hold true today as it did 100 years ago. Our country continues, thru public policies to promote the multicultural mosaic approach while the USA's approach of the melting pot is weakening, or appears to be undergoing some erosion. In some ways, I believe the Canadian approach has positioned us well to deal with the world of the 3rd millennium. Immigrants to Canada have historically maintained a core attachment to their countries of origin, their culture of origin. In today's world of accessible, affordable travel, communications (internet, wireless communications, etc), many immigrants to the USA are no longer identifying themselves as Americans first and foremost but rather are maintaining their "original" identity as equally important to that of their adopted country.

3. The face of Canada and the U.S. has changed due to immigration. The U.S. has received significant immigration from Latin American countries while Canada has received a lot of immigration from Asian countries. If these immigration patterns continue, how do you think it will impact the relationship between Canada and the U.S.?

If the current immigration patterns that exist for United States and for Canada continue, it will surely have an impact on Canada's relationship with the USA. The reality of our shared border means, I believe, that Canada will continue its many ties to the USA, trade, cultural, familial, and so forth. However, the United States will of necessity also look to enhance its relationships with Latin and South America, as will its citizens who originate from those areas. Meanwhile Canada, given the growing importance of its Asian immigration, is determined to strike the right balance, at least on the international trade front, between trade with the USA and enhancing its bilateral trade links with

Asian countries, primarily China, and India (South Asian). One has only to examine Canada's recently announced Strategy for the Emerging Markets to understand this.

4. Is Canada doing enough to promote cultural diversity abroad?

Well, I think the announcement of Michaelle Jean's appointment as Canada's next Governor General is certainly proof that our government is committed to promoting cultural diversity within Canada but also on the international scene. And that diversity for which Canada is known doesn't only signify ethnic, racial and religious diversity. It also means the ability to include a diversity of political and cultural thought; Bloc Quebecois, Parti Québécois, for instance. Where else in the world have we witnessed the birth of a political movement that calls into question the very existence of a country and its political and social mores, and ably integrate said movement into its very fundamental institutions? Can we do more? Certainly! We must do more to recruit, hire and promote members of Canada's ethnically and racially diverse communities into our public service, especially the Foreign Service and the military so that the public face we witness everyday in Canada's cities and communities is also witnessed abroad by officials and citizens of other countries.

5. Do you think racism is a problem in Canada? What needs to be done to combat it?

Is racism a problem in Canada? Of course racism is a problem in Canada. Canada is not exempt from the history of institutional, political, legislative discriminatory practices that characterized the "modernization" and "industrialization" of our societies over the centuries. It has also not been exempt from exclusionary policies; witness our first official immigration legislation and subsequent Immigration Acts in the 20th Century, the very fundamental basis of which was to exclude non-whites from setting foot in Canada. Our Chinese Head Tax, treatment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, of Italian and Ukrainian Canadians during that very same period. And don't get me started on exclusion of Blacks from virtually every facet of normal, regular activities in our country until just a couple of decades ago. Still today, study after study demonstrates that regardless of the indicator chosen, persons of African heritage/descent are to be found at the bottom… double and triple the level of unemployment, of under-employment. While the term the "glass ceiling" has become symbolic for the obstacles women face within our society, the term that best describes the situation with which Blacks are faced even today, would be the "Steel Ceiling". The first, while constituting a barrier, still leaves one with the impression that it can be broken, shattered. The second on the other hand, leaves one with the impression of a nearly impenetrable obstacle.

6. Do you think Canada takes advantage of its diversity? What can we do to better benefit from it?

Canada does attempt to take advantage of its diversity whether thru public policy, international trade for instance and the recently announced Emerging Markets Strategy. And we have become leaders in the domain of cross cultural accommodation, mediation, and conciliation. Much more is required and essentially to ensure Canada improves the benefits of multiculturalism and diversity, the very notion must evolve past a simple numbers game… how many have been hired (that of course remains an important component of benefiting from cultural diversity), to have we examined our policies, traditions, processes to integrate diversity.