



# 2024 International Canadian Studies Summit: Opening remarks\*

BY THE HONOURABLE YUEN PAU WOO

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**Appointed to the Senate of Canada in November 2016, the Honourable Yuen Pau Woo sits as an independent representing British Columbia. He served as facilitator of the Independent Senators Group from 2017 to 2021.**

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It is my pleasure to deliver opening remarks to the 2024 International Canadian Studies Summit. I want to thank Professors Jean Michel Montsion and Daniel Béland for inviting me. I am pleased for this opportunity to reconnect with scholars I have had the pleasure to interact with over the years.

That includes Dr. Montsion, whom I met many years ago at the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. The fact that our path to this conference on international Canadian Studies ran through our time together at a think tank on Canada's relations with Asia says something about the nature of Canadian Studies. It is that the value of Canadian Studies and an appreciation for the value of Canadianists such as all of you are more often recognized outside of Canada than within our borders. But it also says something about the problem facing Canadian Studies in general, which is that if it is more valued outside of Canada than within Canada, how do we muster domestic support for the expansion of Canadian Studies programs worldwide?

This is a question that I imagine many of you will be discussing in the sessions to follow. It is also a question that was posed by the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Development at hearings held in the spring of 2023 on the broader topic of cultural diplomacy. Nik Nanos and Dr. Béland, from whom you will hear shortly, testified at those hearings, as did other Canadian Studies program directors from around the world.

Senators heard loud and clear the plea from your colleagues that there was a need to reinvigorate Canadian Studies along the lines of the Understanding Canada program which was terminated in 2012. Indeed, our 2019 Senate Standing Committee report entitled *Cultural Diplomacy at the Front Stage of Canada's Foreign Policy* specifically called for "Global Affairs Canada [to] support the creation of a modernized Canadian Studies program that would contribute to knowledge about Canada in the world."

In summary, the Global Affairs Canada (GAC) response to that call is as follows:

1. *Canadian diplomats are doing the work of enhancing knowledge and understanding of Canada abroad;*
2. *The Government is supporting Canadian educational institutions in welcoming students from abroad, forging educational partnerships with foreign institutions, and promoting outbound mobility of Canadian students;*
3. *International alumni of Canadian institutions serve as bridges between Canada and their home country and they contribute to a legacy of goodwill and cooperation.*

In short, the promotion of Canadian Studies as such is not a priority for GAC.

Canadian Heritage, for its part, has said that it is willing to support GAC in “exploring options for the delivery of a Canadian Studies program oriented around Canada’s international priorities and designed for impact.”

The idea that a Canadian Studies program should be oriented around “Canada’s international priorities” makes me uneasy, but this is where an audience such as this one can help shape a definition of “Canada’s international priorities” that is faithful to the complexity of Canada’s history, economy, and society, rather than one that comes out of the Foreign Minister’s mandate letter.

The fate of Canadian Studies abroad is tied to the broader question of Canada’s presence in the world. I am not referring narrowly to our diplomatic presence by way of embassies, consulates, and trade offices. There is a separate policy discussion underway about the need to invest in and modernize our foreign service for the 21st century, including our physical footprint around the world. That discussion is contained in a different Senate Foreign Affairs Committee report, entitled *More than a Vocation: Canada’s Need for a 21st Century Foreign Service*.

The way in which we think about Canada’s place in the world must be more than the sum of our positions on major foreign policy issues or the footprint of our diplomatic representation abroad. After all, when you think about grandiose official pronouncements of recent governments—for example, “Canada as an energy superpower” under Stephen Harper or “Canada is back” à la Justin Trudeau—the track record is not very impressive.

We don’t do enough to actively promote and celebrate Canada’s businesses, NGOs, educational institutions, and cultural groups that are doing important things across the world, and above all Canadian citizens who live abroad. This kind of recognition, however, seems to be a difficult thing for resident Canadians to do. We seem to be either shy about talking about non-official Canadian presence around the world, or even dismissive or resentful about some aspects of that reality.

For example, the stock of outbound direct investment by Canadian companies has for many years been larger than that of inbound investment. Rather than celebrating the prowess of Canadian overseas investment and the benefits of such for the Canadian economy, the common refrain—including on Parliament Hill—is, “Why aren’t those companies investing in Canada instead?” You may be aware that there is a movement afoot to direct our public pension funds to put more of their money in Canada, out of proportion to the size of our economy. Parliament recently passed a bill to tighten national security rules around inbound investment, with little consideration given to what it might mean for the outbound investments of Canadian companies.

Perhaps the least appreciated aspect of Canada’s presence in the world is our overseas citizens. Late last year, I commissioned from the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada a report on the state of knowledge about Canadians abroad, with a focus on policy issues arising from this overseas population. Nearly 20 years earlier, the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada was the research pioneer on this topic, producing the first-ever estimates of Canadians abroad and elucidating some of the policy issues around our overseas population. The purpose of my commission was to get an update on the state of knowledge about Canadians abroad.

The report was written by Dr. Lucia Kovacikova and released in April of this year. Among the major findings and recommendations are the following:

- There are over 4 million Canadians residing abroad, accounting for over 11 percent of the national population. Statistics Canada in fact believes that the number could be as high as 5.3 million. That number is larger than the populations of most Canadian provinces. Indeed, I have taken to calling our overseas citizens “the Province of Canada in the world.”
- We know relatively little about the Canadian diaspora, their experiences abroad, and how current federal and provincial policies affect them. Policy areas that have an impact on the diaspora’s experience include consular services, health care, taxation, voting rights, and economic and cultural policies, among others. These important areas of public policy are the responsibility of various de-

partments and agencies at different levels of government. Hence, working with and supporting the diaspora requires an across-governmental approach.

- Members of the diaspora have the right to vote in national elections and often pay Canadian taxes while residing abroad. They are also unofficial representatives of Canada within their local communities and establish their own professional and personal networks that can aid in Canada's economic development; promote knowledge-sharing, research, and innovation; and help build cultural ties between Canada and other countries.
- In short, the diaspora is an active international community and an untapped resource for Canada in the increasingly globalized world.
- The Government of Canada does not have an official strategy for cultivating the diaspora. This contrasts sharply with diaspora engagement policies of other countries, where citizens residing abroad are being actively incorporated into areas like skill sharing, economic development, cultural exchanges, and foreign policy.

To the extent that resident Canadians know about their overseas compatriots, attitudes toward the diaspora range from ambivalence to resentment. Of course, we celebrate the Canadian entertainment, business, and athletic superstars who live in Miami, Los Angeles, London, and Paris. Beyond the handful of brand names that the average Canadian can recognize among celebrity citizens living abroad, however, there is a persistent belief that the general population of Canadians living overseas are self-interested individuals with little to offer the motherland, even to the extent of being seen as disloyal and a burden on the Canadian taxpayer.

This sentiment is expressed most prominently when there is a need to evacuate Canadian citizens from places where there is severe civil strife. This usually applies to non-Caucasian Canadians, some of whom are naturalized citizens who chose to go back to their native countries or to third countries for family or professional reasons. The evacuation of Ukrainian Canadians and more generally the warm reception given to Ukrainian refugees has changed the tone of public sentiment on this issue—in a way that is telling.

We are not yet at the stage where a mass exodus from Hong Kong may take place (I hope not), but how will the Canadian public respond to a desire for as many as 300,000 Hong Kongers with Canadian passports to return to this country en masse? I still remember when Hong Kong immigrants who returned to Asia after they got their Canadian status were labelled by politicians and the media as “foreigners with Canadian passports” or “immigrants of convenience.” It is little wonder that there is a general sense of antipathy toward our Canadian diaspora.

The very term “Canadian diaspora” is an example of why so many resident Canadians have a limited understanding of our presence in the world. When politicians, journalists, and scholars talk about the Canadian diaspora, they are almost always referring to minority racialized communities *in* Canada who maintain ties with their native countries. They are not referring to our citizens abroad. Hence the Indian diaspora in Canada, the African diaspora in Canada, the Chinese diaspora in Canada, and so on.

What does it say about our self-image that the term “diaspora” is used to refer to minority Canadians living in Canada, rather than Canadian citizens living outside of the country?

I think it has to do with how Canadians see themselves in relation to the world. There is a sense among many of us that we won the lottery by being born in this country or by having been selected as an immigrant to Canada. Unfortunately, it often comes with the rider that, having won the lottery, why would anyone choose to give it up by going abroad? I have heard many times the view that there is something ignoble about moving to another country after immigrating to Canada, even if it is for perfectly sensible professional or family reasons.

Our national psyche is built on the powerful idea of Canada being a country of immigrants, but it takes a turn into parochialism when we cannot appreciate the value of also being a country of emigrants. We tend to see immigration as a one-way ticket, with Canada as the final stop.

There is a paradox here, which has to do with the difficulty that many immigrants face in getting jobs that are commensurate with their skills and experience. Is it any surprise that immigrants who come from dynamic economies and cannot find suitable work in Canada should choose to go back to those places to pursue professional opportunities? You may be aware of a recent study showing that accession rates of immigrants to take up Canadian citizenship are declining, as well as media stories about recent immigrants who choose to leave Canada because of the difficulty in finding suitable housing, jobs, etc. This is feeding into the broader partisan debate about how Canada is “broken” as well as support for immigration in general, which has fallen to about 50 percent.

There are good reasons to be concerned about lower rates of citizenship accession and even better reasons to help new immigrants settle successfully into their adopted country. But if they choose to leave Canada to return to their native countries or to go to third countries for personal or professional reasons, wouldn't we be better off embracing them as part of a global asset for the country, rather than writing them off as having Canadian “passports of convenience”? The reality of attachment to Canada is that it works both ways. A Canada that is not interested in attaching to its overseas citizens will only foster a pool of overseas citizens who are not interested in attaching to Canada.

Changing a mindset on Canadians abroad will take time, and it must start with deliberate public policy. I have long argued for an agency within the federal government that is dedicated to increasing the attachment of overseas Canadians to Canada, and which has the power to coordinate activities across different departments that touch on issues of attachment. There are many issues to consider, including data collection, residency qualifications, taxation, social security, and dual citizenship. For provincial governments, there are additional questions to do with health insurance, property tax, and housing.

Dr. Kovacikova's report reinforces this point. The central insight from her research and previous work by Dr. Don DeVoretz and Kenny Zhang is that Canadians abroad are not contingent liabilities on our national balance sheet but are a hidden asset for the country. The extent to which this asset can be unhidden depends on whether Canadians embrace their overseas compatriots in the way we embrace newcomers to the country. It also depends on whether there are government policies that explicitly focus on connecting with Canadians abroad and encouraging them to participate in Canadian affairs.

Not unlike the evolution in thinking about the meaning of Canada that came with the gradual awareness of the vastness of this country in the 19th century, recognition of Canadians abroad represents a new frontier in our thinking about the future of the country. As much as we are proud to be a country of immigrants, we should be equally proud of Canadians who venture abroad. They are, as I have coined, citizens of *the Province of Canada in the World*.

My closing point is that Canadians abroad can be an important ally in the promotion of Canadian Studies. As with all of you who are in the trenches teaching Canadian Studies across the world, overseas Canadians help craft a Canadian identity that is tailored to the contexts and cultures where they live. I hope you will embrace them in your own efforts to revive and strengthen the ever-important work of telling Canadian stories here and everywhere. I wish you a stimulating and productive conference and look forward to your questions. ■

## NOTE

\* Print remarks as delivered.

## REFERENCES

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