**ADRIENNE CLARKSON**

**We must remember that Canadians are not immune to racism**

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How does one explain to ourselves or to the world that people were killed, shot in the back, while they were praying to the one God who created us all. Are there any explanations possible?

Our prime minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, told us decades ago that living next to the United States was “like sleeping with an elephant” – we are the mouse, they are the elephant. Everything they do reflects on us. Since June of 2015, we have been hearing the rhetoric of such horror, ignorance and hatred that we are in danger of being smothered. With the lack of frontiers to social media, to television, we are bombarded with it, too. Even if we live in a country called Canada – with our own beliefs and goals, our own history and ideals – we are not immune to seeing the ugliness, and to hearing the appalling messages. Even if we know them to be untrue, to be false, to be lies, we still hear them. We can imagine that they are heard by people who are afraid, isolated, unbalanced, and alone.

In that way, we are not immune. We hear people who want leadership and who become leaders referring to an entire nation, who is their neighbour, as rapists and criminals. We hear the calumny. We are appalled. But the words have been said. And the words have been heard.

The horror in Quebec City does not reflect what we as Canadians believe. It makes us feel terrible. It makes us feel unworthy that this should have happened on our soil. How could such a thing have happened?

For me, the shooting at the mosque also reminds us of our not-very-happy past. We have not been immune to being infected by dreadful ideas. When Sikhs arrived early in the 20th century, we turned them away. When Jews from Europe came on a boat called the St. Louis looking for refuge just before the Second World War , we turned them away as well, to almost certain death. During this dark period we also took Japanese-Canadians, who were born in this country, and forced them into camps – depriving them of all their human rights, confiscating their property.

And even today, when we have still not dealt with the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which has laid out very carefully what we should be doing for our indigenous peoples

This country has always had to fight against prejudice and shortsightedness generated and sustained by bad ideas. The health of our society demands that we continue to fight. We must never become complacent and think that we are better than anybody else because Canada happens not to be a place where you can buy an assault rifle down the street or where everyone carries a pistol in their glove compartment. We have to remember that we are not immune from racism and from denying our fellow citizens, often the most vulnerable, basic human rights.

I know what it is like to arrive in a country with nothing, and to be vulnerable. My Chinese family and I came to Canada in 1942 when I was three years old. We waited on a dock in Hong Kong while we were checked off by the officials, and we very nearly were not allowed on that boat. Everybody else who was picked up at Stanley Bay in Hong Kong that day was white. We were the only Chinese. One person with a list turned to another and said, “Why are these people here, they’re not white?” The other said, “It’s all right, their names are there. Let’s just let them on.” Through that fluke of fate, I came to Canada with my family, on a Red Cross ship with one suitcase for each of us. Sixty years later, I became Governor-General of Canada.

At the time I arrived, Canada was still fully operating the Chinese Exclusion Act, which had been enacted in 1923 to discourage “immigration from countries that were not white, and particularly Chinese.” I have seen the page in the ledger where I am listed as a nine-year-old girl from Hong Kong in 1947. I do not understand why we were not listed right away, and to my knowledge we were never asked to pay the notorious hundred-dollar “head tax.” Sometimes systems are not enforced, sometimes they are neglected, and sometimes people benefit. My family were among the lucky.

Canada has always been a country where we are able to adjust and accommodate, where we leave people to be themselves. We must let people wear what they want to wear. We must always be the kind of society that understands that other people have brought different stories and different narratives to this place. We must respect their stories, as we ask them to respect ours. And, above all, we all belong together. We are one family.