One of the most common reasons given by immigrants for coming to Canada is that they want to give their children a better life. Immigrant parents make huge sacrifices in the hopes their children will succeed, get a higher education and become engaged Canadian citizens. There is a lot of pressure put on the next generation not only by their parents, but by those who advocate increasing immigration levels in Canada.

In a recent article in the *Globe and Mail*, Ratna Omidvar, president of the Maytree Foundation, wrote:

"the children of immigrants have higher rates of post-secondary education than non-immigrant Canadians. What’s more, those born to parents from Africa, China and other Asian countries attend university and college at far higher rates than both non-immigrant Canadians and those born to immigrants from anglosphere countries."

The facts exist to support the argument that first-generation Canadians integrate successfully into Canadian society and achieve high levels of success. But how does the next generation negotiate the various pressures to succeed and integrate into Canadian society? How do they forge an identity that is both Canadian but that also preserves elements of their family's heritage and culture?

This evening at the Ottawa Main Library, M.P. Michael Chong and policy advisor Sunny Uppal, two prominent leaders and first generation Canadians of Asian descent, share their stories of growing up as the children of Asian immigrants in celebration of Asian Heritage Month.

The event has been organized by the Passages to Canada Speaker’s Bureau, a national educational initiative through which Canadians share their stories of immigration and diverse heritage with students and community groups across Canada.

In light of this evening’s event, on behalf of the Historica-Dominion Institute, I sat down with Michael Chong, M.P. (Wellington-Halton Hills) to get his thoughts on the central issues facing first-generation Canadians.

**Jeremy:** Your parents were both immigrants; your father is Chinese and your mother, Dutch. What has growing up in Canada, as the child of immigrants, meant for you and your career
aspirations?

**Michael:** My parents faced barriers that I never did, and I was given opportunities that they never had. From an early age, I wanted to give back to my community and country. Public office and public service is how I decided to do that.

**Jeremy:** What elements of your parents' cultural identity have you kept, and what have you decided to disregard?

**Michael:** We have made an effort to tell our three children about their grandparents and where they came from. When they get a little older, we would like them to learn either Dutch or Chinese, to re-connect them to their roots.

**Jeremy:** In your experience, are there particular challenges that the children of immigrants face that are different from those faced in non-immigrant families?

**Michael:** It really depends on the situation. Some face language barriers, other cultural barriers. Others still face school-yard taunts. In general, I think things have really changed for the better and that is why Canada is such a desired destination for many.

**Jeremy:** How has your upbringing in such a diverse household impacted your ideas around Canadian identity?

**Michael:** Being in a mixed-race marriage meant that my parents came from two very different solitudes -- both Chinese and Dutch, both Asian and European. As their child, I was only partly in each of those two solitudes, neither completely in, nor completely out. As a result, I very strongly bonded to my identity as a Canadian.

**Jeremy:** In 2004, you wrote an editorial for the *Globe and Mail* arguing that Canadian identity should not be hyphenated, such as referring to Chinese-Canadians. Rather, we should strive for a common identity that allows for understanding among all ethnic groups. Have your thoughts on this changed at all over the years?

**Michael:** I still feel strongly about this. As Canada becomes more diverse, we need to coalesce around the idea that all Canadians, regardless of their ancestry, or whether they have been here for four or 400 years, are citizens who share a commons set of rights and responsibilities. If we don't, the forces that pull us apart will become much stronger that the ones that unite us.

**Jeremy:** May was declared Asian Heritage Month by the Government of Canada in 2002. There have been arguments made with respect to this and Black History Month in February that setting aside a single month is tokenistic and keeps us from studying this history all year round. Others argue that it is important to designate a month to acknowledge the contributions and struggles of certain communities. Where do you fall in this debate?

**Michael:** These designations serve a purpose. They highlight the contributions that various Canadians have made to building Canada. In a perfect world, we wouldn't need to do this, and perhaps, one day, we won't.

**Jeremy:** What role do you think stories like yours play in helping to inform, educate and inspire new generations of Canadians?
Michael: I think that for many communities, getting involved in politics represents the last stage of integration into Canadian society. Many immigrants to Canada are focused on surviving and putting food on the table, and don't have time for politics. However, when their children win elections and public office, it shows that if you get involved, you can make a difference and help build a better Canada.