

## Dr. Rey D. Pagtakhan – First Fil-Canadian Member of Parliament (MP)

# A multi-faceted leader

MORE than twenty years ago, on November 21, 1988, Dr. Rey D. Pagtakhan earned his place in history when he won a seat in Canada's Parliament, unseating New Democrat David Orlikow, the 26-year-entrenched incumbent. Taking his seat in the House of Commons in Ottawa that following December, he became the first Filipino Canadian to become an MP (Member of Parliament) and the first Filipino to be an elected member of a federal or national legislature in the whole of North America and the world.

"It was not within my dream that I would be a Member of Parliament in Canada," said Dr. Rey, as his constituents often call him. The humble physician, professor and politician has surely come a long way from the poor boy who was educated through the generosity of his community in Cavite and who never forgot his roots.

Dr. Pagtakhan achieved many milestones for himself and for the Filipino community in Canada. Not only was he the first Filipino Canadian MP, serving for 16 years from 1998 until 2004, but he was also the first Filipino Canadian to be appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister (Jean Chrétien), and the first Filipino Canadian to be appointed to the Federal Cabinet. Dr. Rey's appointment to the Cabinet also made him the highest-ranking Philippine-born elected official serving outside of the Philippines. He was also the 1998 Most Outstanding Young Filipino-Canadian awardee. His long and distinguished career will forever be remembered in the history books.

Born January 7, 1935 in Bacoor, Cavite, Dr. Rey is one of 11 children. Growing up in a large family with a relatively small income presented certain obstacles for the young Dr. Rey who, even in his early years, had been described by teachers as having a "brilliant mind".



Rey at first thought of becoming a journalist or lawyer, but his father enrolled him in pre-medicine at the University of the Philippines. As a medical student in the College of Medicine at the UP, he served as a Research Associate in Pediatrics at the UP Philippine General Hospital Centre. After graduation, Dr. Rey completed his residency and fellowship at the Washington University Medical Centre/St. Louis Children's Hospital where he met his wife, Gloria Visarra, who holds a Master of Science in Dietetics degree from the same university. They married in 1964 and Rey took up residency in Pediatrics at the St. Louis Heart Association.

In 1968, Dr. Pagtakhan and his family immigrated to Canada and were granted Canadian citizenship in 1974. They have four sons: Reis, Advin, Sherwin, and Christopher Justin; a daughter-in-law (Mabini Joy), and a granddaughter (Kailani Joy).

A specialist in children's lung diseases, Rey lived in Winnipeg, Manitoba where he sought to develop his pediatric health skills. He accepted a Post-doctoral Fellowship in Pediatric Respiriology at the Children's Hospital of Winnipeg of the University of Manitoba Faculty of Medicine and pursued his Master of Science studies in Prenatal Physiology. He served as Director of the Memorial Cystic Fibrosis Centre and as President of the Manitoba Pediatric Society in addition to being full-time on the Faculty of Medicine.

Dr. Rey was also very active in community affairs. He helped revive the United Council of Filipino Canadian Associations in Canada (UCFAC) (now called the National Council of Canadian Filipino Associations) in 1982. As National President of UCFAC, Dr. Rey was elected as the first Chair of the Canadian Ethno-cultural Council (CEC), a coalition of 37 national ethno-cultural organizations in Canada in 1984. He officially joined the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) Program Planning Mission to the Philippines in 1986 on invitation by the Canadian government. He received Canada's Governor-General Queen Elizabeth Silver Jubilee Medal for his professionalism and community achievements.

Dr. Rey was a citizen member of the Winnipeg Police Commission (1983 to 1986) and won a three-year term as a School Trustee (1986 to 1989) in a public school division.

In 20 years of serving in various community roles, Pagtakhan had become the acknowledged leader of the Winnipeg Pinoy and was deemed

ripe for political office. Thus, it came as no surprise when he decided in 1988, with the blessing of his family, to take on the challenges of national politics.

Pagtakhan served as parliamentary secretary to Prime Minister Jean Chrétien from February 23, 1996 to July 15, 1998. He was appointed to cabinet on January 9, 2001, and served as Secretary of State (Asia-Pacific) until January 15, 2002. His appointment to cabinet marked the first time in over 75 years that an M.P. from north Winnipeg became a member of the federal cabinet. As Secretary of State (Asia-Pacific), Dr. Pagtakhan took on a number of tasks including representing Canada as Head of its delegation to the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects.

On January 15, 2002, he was promoted to Minister of Veterans Affairs and Minister responsible for Manitoba. In this capacity, he served on the Cabinet Committees on Economic Union, Social Union and Government Communications.

During his tenure as Minister responsible for Manitoba (also known as the Senior Minister for Manitoba), Pagtakhan was part of the government that funded major projects in Manitoba such as the expansion of the Red River Floodway and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. Pagtakhan also served as Secretary of State (Science, Research and Development) from May 2002 to December 2003.

On December 12, 2003, new Prime Minister Paul Martin appointed him as Minister of Western Economic Diversification. In this capacity he served on the Cabinet Committees on Domestic Affairs and Aboriginal Affairs.

Since returning to private life in 2004, Pagtakhan has been actively involved in numerous ventures. In 2005 and 2006, he served as the Director of the Global College at the University of Winnipeg and Chair of the College's Advisory Board. He is currently Co-Chair of its Global Advisors. In addition, Pagtakhan serves as a Public



Galing Pinoy showcases the triumph of the Filipino spirit - the Filipino's innate perseverance to rise above. A double entendre, Galing Pinoy literally translates to both coming from (or brought to you by) the Filipino and Filipino ingenuity.



Adjudicator of the Prairie Regional Panel of the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council, Governor of the Canadian International Peace Project and

Chair of the Manitoba Liberal Party's Election Readiness Committee. In 2005, he was invited to speak in Manila on the topic of Canadian federalism and its relevance to constitutional reform in the Philippines.

As a Member of Parliament, Dr. Pagtakhan has published papers on senate reform, health care system, prenatal nutrition, and hate on the internet and has spoken across Canada and abroad on a variety of issues. As a medical doctor, he has authored and co-authored several chapters and papers for medical textbooks and journals and has lectured widely at medical schools and scientific conferences.

He has received several awards and honors, including the Canadian Governor-General Queen Elizabeth Silver Jubilee Medal, the Missouri and St. Louis Heart Associations' Joint Research Fellowship (held at Washington University School of Medicine), the Manila Medical Society First Prize for Basic Research, the UP Medical Alumni Society Most Distinguished Alumnus Award, and the Philippine Presidential Citation for Outstanding Filipino Overseas. The University of the Philippines also conferred upon Dr. Pagtakhan a Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.

Former longtime Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien perhaps paid the supreme accolade to Dr. Rey, the poor boy who rose to great heights through hard work, without ever forgetting his roots, when he said, "Rey represents what Canada is all about."

He likewise represents what the Filipino spirit is all about. Truly, one great Pinoy! (AJPress)



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