

MEET TEAM



TRUDEAU

That we now have a cabinet that looks like the rest of Canada shouldn't come as a surprise. It came about just "because it's 2015" as Trudeau put it.

By Ranjit Bhaskar



With Punjabi the third most common tongue in the new House of Commons, it is no surprise that the new Liberal Cabinet reflects the predominance of MPs sharing this South Asian linguistic and cultural heritage. So much so that Maryam Monsef, the Minister of Democratic Institutions, who is Muslim and of Afghan heritage, is the only one among the five visible minority ministers who is not a Sikh and doesn't speak Punjabi.

This unprecedented number of ministers in its ranks mirrors the maturing of an immigrant community with a history spanning more than

transit that his party was promising. Family reunification was also a priority for the Liberals, he said, not just from the social point of view but also from the economic.

"When parents or grandparents come over, they play a big role in a family's well-being and material success," Bains said giving his own family's experience as an example.

His important portfolio is a welcome departure from the Stephen Harper cabinets, where minority ministers only had token presence.

nomination as the Liberal candidate was not without controversy. A large group quit the party, unhappy with what they said was the imposition of Sajjan on them while overlooking their preferred candidate.

Sajjan, a member of Trudeau's Economic Team announced during the campaign and was seen with him at various stops across the country. Asked about the controversy during one such stop in Brampton, Sajjan dismissed it as a "small dispute in the family" that would not have much impact on his campaign. "I've had no negative vibes from

Amarjeet Sohi has been quoted as saying after his appointment to the cabinet. "It's kind of a dream come true. I feel honoured that Prime Minister Trudeau gave me the opportunity to be part of a great team."

Born in 1964 into a farming family in India, he was 17 when he moved to Edmonton in 1981 after being sponsored by an older brother. As he spoke almost no English, he had to put up with bullying when he began high school. Later he became deeply involved in local Punjabi social theatre and returned to India to study the art form and advocate



Navdeep Bains with family



Harjit Sajjan

a century in Canada. It also the manifestation of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's campaign promise to present a cabinet that is diverse and gender balanced.

That we now have a cabinet that looks like the rest of Canada shouldn't come as a surprise. It came about not just "because it's 2015" as Trudeau put it.

Navdeep Bains, Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, told this writer during the Liberal election campaign that "diversity would be a given in the Trudeau cabinet" because it was an organic part of his larger team. "Bring together the best of our 20 MPs and inevitably it would be a diverse group," said Bains.

Bains' elevation was not a surprise as he was his party's main adviser for the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The MP for Mississauga-Malton, he is the only experienced parliamentarian amongst the four ministers of South Asian heritage.

Having been the MP for Mississauga—Brampton South from 2004 to 2011, Bains has experience as Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and as the Liberal Critic for Public Works and Government Services, the Treasury Board, International Trade, Natural Resources, and Small Business and Tourism.

He was 26 years old when first elected in 2004 and was the youngest Liberal MP then. An MBA with a specialization in Finance, as a Certified Management Accountant, for several years Bains worked in accounting and financial analysis at the Ford Motor Company of Canada. He became a visiting professor at Ryerson University's Ted Rogers School of Management after his defeat in the 2011 elections.

During this year's campaign, Bains highlighted the investments in public

Harjit Sajjan, as Minister of National Defence, was again not a surprise. His appointment marks yet another case of a minority MP getting an important position. Sajjan was the first Sikh to command a Canadian army regiment. A decorated Afghanistan veteran, he also served with the Vancouver police gang crime unit.

"His approach, based on his knowledge of local culture and tribal dynamics, helped senior management to engage with influential Afghan tribal leaders, and led to the identification of insurgent command and control connection points," according to the citation on the Governor General's website.

Sajjan, who was born in India and came here with his family at age five, grew up in his Vancouver South riding. However, his

anybody," he said.

While both Bains and Sajjan were seen as star MPs likely to make it to the front bench of the Liberal caucus, the appointment of the next two ministers of South Asian heritage came as a surprise.

Amarjeet Sohi, Minister of Infrastructure and Communities, has a backstory like no one else's. A three-term Edmonton city councillor, Sohi was a former bus driver. He was also wrongfully imprisoned, without charge, as a terrorist in India. He has gone on and won various awards for his efforts to promote cooperation among cultural groups.

"I just absolutely feel honoured and humbled, that I have been given an opportunity to be part of the change we're bringing to communities,"

rural land reform. It was during one such effort to organize farmers that he was branded a terrorist and thrown into prison for two years. After being exonerated, he returned to Canada to rebuild his life.

While Sohi was at least on some speculative lists of likely ministers, Bardish Chagger, the Minister of Small Business and Tourism was on nobody's list. Chagger also broke the usual mould of "ethnic" MPs getting elected from ridings with large minority populations. She was elected from Waterloo-Kitchener where not many look like her family who emigrated from India.

A life-long Waterloo resident, she graduated in 2004 from the University of Waterloo with a bachelor's degree in science. She began working for the Liberal party as a teen and volunteered for community organizations for the past two decades. At university, Chagger ran the Young Liberals association and organized delegates for Paul Martin's leadership campaign.

She then worked as an executive assistant to former Liberal MP from the riding, Andrew Telegdi, who held his seat from 1993 to 2008. After Telegdi lost his seat, Bardish took a job at the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre as their special events coordinator.

"A lot of the experiences that I have are allowing me to be able to do a job as a Member of Parliament," said Chagger in a radio interview.

The youngest among the four ministers of South Asian heritage, Chagger has the distinction of being the first ever female Sikh minister in Canada. The men cannot claim any such distinction as Herb Dhaliwal was the first Sikh to become a full cabinet minister in Canada in 1997, followed by Ujjal Dosanjh in 2004. Liberals both, Dhaliwal held the revenue portfolio while Dosanjh held health.

South Asian MPs double their presence

With 22 MPs, the presence of South Asian members in the current parliament has more than doubled that of the previous one. The 2011 election had returned only nine MPs from this ethnic group.

Sikhs dominate the new cohort. Ever since Gurbax Singh Malhi created history in 1993 by becoming the first turbaned Sikh MP in Canada, the community's presence in the House of Commons has been steadily increasing.

Their tally is now 17 – five turbaned and five women – in a house of 338. For a community which numbers a little less than half a million in a population of 35 million, this is a big achievement. It means about 5% of the MPs are Sikh although the community accounts for less than 1.5% of Canada's population.

Another perceivable trend is that some of them have been elected from areas where the Sikh community's presence is insignificant. Although the bulk of the MPs still are from Brampton and Mississauga in Ontario and Surrey in B.C., Bardish Chagger got elected from Waterloo-Kitchener and Anju Dhillon from the French-speaking Dorval area in Quebec. And, most of the new MPs are Canadian-born unlike earlier cohorts.

Overall, 14% of the new MPs are visible minorities, which is close to parity with the 15% of visible minority citizens in Canada. In 2011, only 9.4% MPs were visible minorities.