
AMARJEET SOHI

From political prisoner
to parliamentarian

By OMAR MOUALLEM

ON A FRIDAY morning in spring 2016, Amarjeet Sohi sat barefoot in the den of his craftsman style home in south Edmonton. His first few months as Canada's federal minister of infrastructure had been frantic, sending him across the country to listen to the wants and needs of every big-city mayor and countless others. In the midst of it all, his father died at 101 years old, and Sohi flew to Punjab for the burial. Just a few weeks later, he was apparently more relaxed in a sun-drenched room decorated with snapshots of his life.

There was a framed photo of his 2007 swearing-in as an Edmonton city councillor on one wall. On another, a painting of Sohi by a former public transit colleague, set against a background of Parliament, Edmonton City Hall, a city bus and a new public library he had advocated for. But one of Sohi's proudest moments is much humbler.

JASON FRANSON



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*Top:
Amarjeet Sohi
in his
Millwoods
home.*

*Bottom:
With his wife,
Sarbjett, and
daughter,
Seerat.*



JASON FRANSON



In June 1994 he had joined a group of immigrants, including his friend Narpinder Hans, raised his right hand and recited the oath of citizenship. They sang “O Canada,” accepted their certificate and celebrated day and night at Sohi’s brother’s house. “In this country, if you are given the right opportunities and you work hard, you can succeed,” Sohi told me, looking out the bright window to a tidy suburban street. “That is why I’m so passionate about the work I do.”

AMARJEET SOHI WAS approached in January 2015 to run for the federal Liberals in Edmonton-Mill Woods, his home of 35 years. The 51-year-old was a neighbourhood watch organizer, union activist and three-term city councillor. As Sohi was filling out the candidate application, he could have just left it at that—two decades of community and public service. But an incident in his past—a wrongful arrest and damaging accusations—was haunting him. Knowing that nomination seekers for all parties have been smeared by

opponents or cut loose for much less, Sohi had to tell the Liberals.

Sohi called the *Edmonton Journal*, an office he’d dialled many times since entering politics. Once, nine years before, when Sohi was a bus driver campaigning for council, a reporter had asked him for some interesting personal trivia. Sohi didn’t mention ever being a political prisoner, his 18 months in solitary confinement—though didn’t people already know? It had been, after all, national news. Sohi instead answered, “When I was new to Canada, I once wore pink shoes to school without knowing that, in Canada, pink was a girl’s colour.”

Now, the would-be MP asked for Paula Simons, a veteran reporter and columnist. They respected each other. Simons had watched Sohi’s political career from the gallery and always found him to be an articulate and effective communicator—a consensus-builder on a sometimes fractured council. He sounded different this time. “He was looking for articles about ‘this incident,’ but he didn’t describe it in great detail,” she recalled. Sohi didn’t want press; he wanted old clippings to defend himself when the inevitable happened. When she called back to say the online archives came up empty, Sohi was astonished. That’s impossible, he told her. It was a front-page story!

Since the newspaper archivists had long ago been laid off, Simons would have to go into the basement

and search through the tangle of microfiche herself. After sitting in the dark for several hours she found it right there on the front page of her own paper. His name was spelled differently then, as “Amarjit,” but there was no mistaking the young man’s dark, deep-set eyes.

“An Edmonton man has been in an Indian prison for more than a month, amid allegations he was involved with Sikh terrorists.”—Dec 19, 1988, *Edmonton Journal*

It took Simons a great deal of coaxing to convince Sohi to give details, to recount the beatings, the sleep deprivation, the concrete floor he slept on, the unsanitary trenches for toilets, the threats against his family. Sohi would, at community events, allude to having been a political prisoner—but until Simons asked he’d never taken a deep dive into his darkest memories. Not even with his wife, Sarbjeet, and daughter, Seerat. At home, his imprisonment was only occasionally mentioned “in a passing sense,” Sohi told me last year. “You feel belittled,” he explained. “You feel that something was taken away from you and it’s a reflection on you—not guilt, but the sense that you’ve done something wrong.”

“There was clearly a campaign to persecute the Sikh people. I did everything I could to get him out of prison.”

THREE MONTHS AFTER Canada’s new infrastructure minister was sworn in at Rideau Hall on November 4, 2015—to which event Sohi wore a pink tie and pocket square—a more casually dressed Sohi sat in a law office, the MP’s temporary Mill Woods digs, surrounded by Indian restaurants, bakeries and fabric stores. He fiddled with a new digital recorder on the boardroom table until its light glowed red. The caution necessary in a high-ranking position had obviously clicked in—but the minister also knows the importance of being open.

His brother Jagdev, an engineer, and sister-in-law Rajinder sponsored his move to Canada in 1981, when Amarjeet was a 17-year-old Punjabi village boy. Back in India, the Sohi clan lived self-reliantly on a multigenerational farm, growing wheat, sugar cane, barley and corn. They were from a Sikh branch of the Jat people, an agricultural caste that in some Indian states are government classified as “Other Backward Class,” those that are socially disadvantaged. But in Canada they were equals under the law, and young Amarjeet quickly took to English and western life.

Fourteen years Amarjeet’s senior, Jagdev always thought of his brother like a son, and he recalls him as

focused, observant and studious since early childhood. “He was always the quiet type,” he told me. Just as in their Punjab village, if there were too much chatter in their Edmonton home, Amarjeet would corner himself off to read in silence. Social justice fascinated him, especially the works of Avtar Pash, a Punjabi poet who would eventually be killed by Sikh separatists for his anti-fundamentalist views, and Gursharan Singh, a progressive playwright known for staging street theatre and touring the poorest parts of India. “Being the thinking type, Amarjeet saw things that need to be done to make society better,” Jagdev said.

While working as a taxi driver in Edmonton, Sohi got involved in Punjabi groups and artist associations.

He acted in a play about the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident, when a ship carrying 376 mostly Sikh asylum seekers arrived on the BC coast only to be sent back to India, where dozens of passengers were arrested or shot on arrival.

Decades later Sohi would join Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to formally apologize, but back in 1988 he was not pursuing politics but theatre. He travelled to India to study Singh’s works, following his plays from village to village to learn his street theatre techniques. Having barely explored India beyond his home province, Sohi yearned to understand his homeland better through the performing arts.

The Khalistani movement to make Punjab a sovereign Sikh state was at a zenith in the 1980s. Earlier in the decade, the Indian military had stormed the holiest Sikh temple, in

Amritsar, and slaughtered 3,000 people in ensuing riots. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation. But Sohi’s political awakening was the 1985 Air India bombing. The Khalistani-motivated attack killed 329 people in Irish airspace, mostly dual Canadian citizens. The western public treated their deaths as an Indian problem and simultaneously demonized brown people. “It was a moment that turned me into a social activist,” said Sohi, speaking slowly and measuredly. “I felt so defeated that some Canadians... implicated the entire faith because of the action of a few.”

Sohi condemns Sikh fundamentalism. He’s been private about his faith all his adult life, having

eschewed wearing a turban and maintained a clean-shaven face. He calls himself a “secular individual.” He also believes that inequality, not religion, was at the root of the violence. Understanding the causes of that inequality is what motivated him to return to his homeland in summer 1988.

“He was just excited to travel India, to get to know more people,” remembered Narpinder Hans, an Edmonton physician and family friend, who met then-24-year-old Sohi in Punjab shortly after he arrived. “Jeet was full of ideas, so youthful—almost teenage-like—full of enthusiasm and wanting to do so much to improve the lives of poor people.” The next time she would see him, in 1990, he was a completely different person.

RAJINDER SOHI got the phone call in Edmonton in November 1988. A relative had read in an Indian newspaper that police had detained Amarjeet in the northeast province of Bihar. On the eve of a protest rally that he had co-organized, Amarjeet was arrested at a fellow artist’s home and thrown into a cell, where he was interrogated and tortured for a week. Authorities believed he had come from Canada, on invitation of Maoists, to train Sikh fundamentalists for war.

Using the Air India bombings to inflame paranoia, the inspector general, via press release, claimed the young man had been trained as a Khalistani terrorist in Canada. They allegedly found him with a revolver and ammunition. Sohi says his only suspicious possession was a book on separatism. His family believes that the inspector general—seeking a promotion—was making a show of a big fish he’d caught.

Such incidents were not unheard of. Rajinder said she has family friends who were falsely imprisoned, then disappeared forever. When she informed Jagdev in Fort McMurray, where he was working, she’d already given up on Amarjeet’s survival. “That’s how the system is,” she said matter of factly.

Weeks later they learned Amarjeet was alive. A CSIS investigator thoroughly interviewed the family and members of Edmonton’s Indian community and became satisfied that Sohi had done nothing wrong. “I said, ‘OK, fine, but what are we supposed to do?’” recalled Rajinder. “You know he’s innocent. We know he’s innocent. Can you guide us?”

If the Indian police made one mistake, it was showboating about the supposedly made-in-Canada extremist. Our federal government didn’t appreciate the suggestion it was ignoring sleeper cells. “That played in our favour. Maybe that’s the only thing that kept him alive,” Rajinder said. On the CSIS investigator’s advice, they wrote to Amarjeet via



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As a city councillor in 2007. Before entering municipal politics, Sohi was a bus driver in Edmonton.

External Affairs, never directly, to signal to the Indian government that this was now a foreign policy issue. Eight hundred Edmontonians signed a petition for his release, and Mill Woods Progressive Conservative MP David Kilgour wrote to India's high commissioner and prime minister. "There was clearly a campaign to persecute the Sikh people. I did everything I could to get him out of prison," said Kilgour, now retired.

The irony isn't lost on Amarjeet Sohi: the Conservative party—which in recent years violated the Constitution to block Omar Khadr's repatriation and attempted to form a second tier of Canadians to deport dual citizens under Bill C-24—once pulled out all the stops to save an alleged terrorist who wasn't even a Canadian citizen. But because Sohi didn't have citizenship in 1988, the Mulroney government was limited in what it could offer beyond diplomatic letters. CSIS did, however, aid the Indian government's investigation of Sohi's Edmonton affairs, reporting back that he wasn't a threat.

Sohi languished in a small cell with two blankets, staring out a window, imagining his family's anguish. Meanwhile his father and his older brother Harkesh travelled from Banbhaura, their village in Punjab, to Bihar to see him, only to be denied visitation. For months, until he was permitted visits, Sohi smuggled messages to his family through other prisoners and sympathetic guards. As his mental health deteriorated, he went on a hunger strike until he had access to better food and the library. "What kept me alive," he told Simons in 2015, "what made a difference, was access to the library and access to the newspapers."

Under India's anti-terrorism law, citizens who

were considered political enemies could be detained without trial. By 1990, news of Sohi's imprisonment had inspired local crusaders to urge Delhi's new government to conduct a trial. Some 21 months after being thrown in jail, and under mounting pressure from Canadian diplomats, Indian protesters and the district magistrate, Sohi's case was thrown out. He was free. After an emotional visit to his parents' farm in Punjab, he boarded a plane to Alberta.

Jagdev's heart broke when he saw his baby brother. Amarjeet was frail. Jagdev felt bones when they hugged. For months, Amarjeet would suddenly lapse into absent-minded states. "You'd talk and he'd be going to another place," remembered Jagdev. But Amarjeet slowly reassembled his life, returned to taxi driving and in 1993 returned to Punjab for his marriage to Sarbjeet, now his wife of 23 years. Amarjeet's contemplative nature helped him persevere, said his brother. "The way he came out of this is so impressive. He must have been thinking right. He must have been very strong-minded to maintain his sanity. It's not that he wasn't a changed person. He was. But it gave him mental strength."

SOHI OVERCAME HARDSHIPS AS A newcomer to Canada—"racism, bullying and a sense of marginalization"—but found more help than hindrances. And no matter how comfortable his life became, he remained an activist. In 2000, when drivers of disability buses felt the City of Edmonton

was exploiting their primarily immigrant workforce to work long hours for low pay and no benefits, Sohi, as union spokesman, fought for fairness. Following the 2005 murder of a young Sikh clerk in a convenience store robbery, he co-founded a citizens group to improve communication between police, social workers and the public. Sohi still mentions these in his biography today.

“He’s a natural leader,” said long-time friend Bill Monro. “He’s ultra-confident in his abilities. People gravitate toward him.” Monro is the riding president for two NDP provincial and federal districts in Edmonton. Over the years, he and Sohi canvassed together on several NDP campaigns, including in Sohi’s current federal riding. Sohi also campaigned in 2003 for David Kilgour, who by then had crossed party lines to the Liberals. (Kilgour would eventually sit as an independent.) Sohi still had these party memberships when he unsuccessfully ran for councillor in 2003. He let them all lapse before his second attempt, in 2007. Councillor Amarjeet Sohi squeezed into city hall by 253 votes of 50,108 cast.

“He was an extremely effective city councillor because he has a great political gift that few politicians have, and that is to listen to people,” said Paula Simons. “So often city councillors come into public hearings or debates with their minds already made up, but

you could see him thinking and listening and analyzing, and that he didn’t come to a conclusion until he weighed the evidence.” Mayor Don Iveson agreed. “That same instinct will serve him very well at the cabinet table,” he said. “You can command and control as a minister, or another order of government with executive power, but as a councillor you can’t do anything without six more votes.”

Sohi’s rise to one of the country’s highest offices embodies everything that is good and possible in Canada.

It wasn’t a stretch to assume Sohi would one day leave municipal politics to run federally on an NDP ticket. In addition to his past campaign work, his brother Jagdev was an active party member. As a councillor, Sohi had earned wide membership support thanks to Monro’s rallying. He even framed Jack Layton’s now famous final words—“Love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear”—in his city hall office. So there was a lot of hurt and betrayal in the NDP camp when Sohi announced his candidacy with the Liberals. “Some people were quite hostile to him,” said Monro, who was thrust into an awkward position, running a campaign against his dear friend while fielding calls from shocked supporters—including Jagdev—fearing Sohi would split the progressive vote

and get Conservative Tim Uppal re-elected.

The Liberals were polling in first place when Sohi made his decision, but by summer they were in last and the NDP had a strong lead. His decision seemed opportunistic and foolish. But Sohi contends that his decision was partly informed by the NDP’s gradual gliding to the centre and by his being inspired by a speech Justin Trudeau gave in Saskatoon. Several months before deciding on his candidacy, Sohi attended a cities convention in Ottawa and met Trudeau, who asked him in private to run. “I really appreciated Justin Trudeau’s commitment to diversity,” explained Sohi. “It came out so authentic. Politicians talk about diversity, that it’s the right thing to do, but it doesn’t come from the heart. His leadership in the party was politics based on values, not based on political brand.”

SOHİ’S RISE TO ONE OF THE country’s highest offices embodies everything that is good and possible in Canada—but his candidacy was an attempt to restore a shaken faith. The Harper decade had alienated Sohi from his citizenship. Further disillusioning moments came on the campaign trail, when burka bans and a “barbaric cultural practices hotline” were touted as Canadian values, and when a Conservative incumbent told a crowd that “brown people” were taking jobs from “whities.” To say Sohi didn’t recognize this Canada would be a stretch; the parallels between today’s Islamophobia and 1980s anti-Sikh sentiment were all too apparent. Only this time the bigotry was not just mainstream, but bolstered by the ruling government.

“I ran for this office because the Canada that embraced me and the Canada that I embraced has been changing for the last 10 years,” he said. “What [Harper’s Conservatives] were trying to do went against what we take pride in as Canadians, which is to bridge our differences, not feed into them for political purposes and further divide us.” The majority rejection of the right’s wedge politics on election night was “a reset, going back to what Canada was and what its potential is,” he said—though his own victory would have to wait 10 days for a ballot recount. Sohi won by 92 votes of 49,517 cast.

As Minister of Infrastructure, Sohi has promised to apply three lenses to every issue: social inclusion, environmental sustainability and economic growth. Mayor Iveson said Sohi possesses a deep compassion for vulnerable people, be they newcomers, indigenous Canadians, religious minorities or low-income families. Sohi as a councillor had relentlessly supported alternative transportation. And as a former bus driver he understands at a gut level the importance of regular



maintenance and the public frustration with failing infrastructure.

University of Alberta political scientist Jim Lightbody doubts that Sohi's social justice work and sensitivity to diversity will have much influence on his new role. His strength, he argued, is his first-hand knowledge of how important federal support is to getting local projects going and how "ego-driven" local councils can be. "Due to his patience as an attentive elected official, he has a pretty good appreciation of the fine arts of bureaucratic baffle-gab and double-talk," Lightbody said. "The advantage to the prime minister of having such a person in this portfolio—much as is the case with the minister of defence, Harjit Sajjan—is that Sohi has hands-on experience; he's been there, done that and got the hardhat."

Sohi, however, has never seen any recession like the one currently squeezing Alberta jobs and resources. Now, as the holder of the purse strings, he must hear out former colleagues and cohorts. One thing he said he will not do is dictate to municipal governments how they must spend their money. "They're more connected to people than the federal government is," he explained. "You give us your priorities and we'll see how they fit into those project lenses and we'll see how we can support you."

AMARJEET SOHI'S FIRST YEAR HASN'T been without issues, especially in his hometown. His Liberal government denied Edmontonians improved EI benefits, saying the city didn't have enough unemployment. Mayor Iveson, one of Sohi's biggest champions, said the feds fundamentally

misunderstood the local economy. (Ottawa later changed its mind.) Sohi has also backtracked on his sentiments about private-public partnerships, or P3s, a framework that only funds infrastructure projects with corporate backing. As a councillor Sohi was one of the model's strongest critics; he argued that P3s didn't just shortchange the Mill Woods LRT line, for example—pressuring the city to pay more or water down its plan—but delayed it for years. Today he maintains that the option works for some jurisdictions so long as it's not forced on them. More trouble followed when news broke that Sohi received a \$46,000 severance package from Edmonton taxpayers—"transition compensation" intended for adjusting to civilian life—even though there was no such transition from city hall to Rideau Hall.

Sohi appreciates the public's anger with his decision to keep the money, but cautions against "playing politics" with politicians' personal lives. When details about his imprisonment and past charges came to light in 2015, Sohi feared how they could be contorted and misconstrued, both by political opponents and the general public. But Sohi said he was instead overwhelmingly heartened by the outpouring of goodness. People and politicians, province and nationwide, shared their sympathy for Sohi's suffering and respect for his perseverance. "I didn't expect that kind of reaction," he admitted. "It really reaffirmed the caring and compassionate nature of people." ■

Omar Mouallem is a contributor to The Guardian, WIRED and newyorker.com. He lives in Edmonton.

Sohi in the federal riding of Edmonton-Mill Woods, which he won in 2015 by 92 votes.