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Singh Hallelujah

Jagmeet Singh brings Canada's social democrats new hope

Members of Canada's centre-left New Democratic Party have chosen their leader: Jagmeet Singh, a politician from Ontario Province and the first non-white to head one of the country's three major parties.

38-year-old Singh is a criminal lawyer with the gift of the gab. His oratory prowess came to the fore when he moved to Toronto's provincial parliament from suburban Brampton. Many Canadians see in Singh – a Sikh with a penchant for snappy suits and striking turbans – a chic, centre-left counterpart to Justin Trudeau, the hip prime minister everyone loves to love.

Singh's background, and the discrimination he experienced growing up, pushed him into politics. He was bullied at school due to his race, and searched by police officers in Brampton on the flimsiest of grounds. He says he wants to use his new position to stand up for the rights of minorities.

Peaks and troughs

In 2011, the NDP became the second-largest party in Canada's House of Commons. It suffered a humiliating defeat in the 2015 elections, losing its status as the official opposition and falling to third place with just 44 of 338 available seats. At last year's party conference, delegates booted out Singh's predecessor Thomas Mulcair in a no-confidence vote.

Singh beat three other party colleagues – Manitoba's Niki Ashton, Ontario's Charlie Angus and Quebec's Guy Caron – to the top post with 54 per cent of his party's vote. The candidates differed little in their ideology, campaigning on issues including the energy sector, social welfare, electoral reform and international relations.

But Singh's selection comes with risks. He does not have a seat in the federal parliament, so he'll be campaigning from the political side-lines. To help him, he's appointed former rival Guy Caron to lead the parliamentary party.

As things stand, the NDP is unlikely to seriously dent Trudeau's popularity in the 2019 elections. Polls show support for the party at around 15 to 20 percent. Canada's first-past-the-post voting arrangements mean the party stands to lose more seats if votes are spread thinly across several constituencies.

The party is hoping Singh will tap into a pool of voters that Trudeau has reserved for himself: the multicultural suburbs of Toronto, whose metropolitan area counts almost six million residents. Singh's relative youth – he is 25 years Mulcair's junior – could also help attract younger voters to the party.

Canada's mid-sized cities also offer a glimmer of hope for Canada's social democrats: centre-left candidates have made gains in Vancouver, Edmonton and Saskatoon, and are predicting more wins in Montreal's municipal elections next month. Rather than standing under the NDP banner here, candidates form groupings with politicians from other progressive parties such as the Greens and the Liberals. This 'post-partisan' approach might actually help the national-level NDP develop strategies to reach out to new types of voters.

A heated debate over multiculturalism and religious symbols in the French-speaking province of Quebec threatens to derail the party's chances there. The NDP is currently the second largest party in the province, with 16 MPs. But Singh's own Sikh faith, expressed in his choice of attire, is unlikely to convince sceptics he is willing to uphold the cherished divide between politics and religious conviction.

Equally, the appointment of the relatively unknown Andrew Scheer as head of the Canadian Conservative party could prove tricky for the social-democrats. Scheer's ultra-conservative stance on social and fiscal issues is unlikely to win him votes from Trudeau's progressive heartlands of Greater Toronto and Quebec province. That frees up the Liberals to focus their efforts on repelling the threat left-of-centre, embodied by the NDP.



Raoul Gebert
Montreal

Raoul Gebert is research fellow at the *Interuniversity Research Centre for Globalization and Work* (CRIMT) in Montreal and has been working for over a decade for the New Democratic Party (NDP) in Canada.