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Singh in the rain

Jagmeet Singh has disappointed as the leader of Canada's social democrats. What the left should learn from this

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A year and a half ago, Jagmeet Singh became the new leader of Canada's left-leaning New Democratic Party (NDP) and was widely celebrated as if he was the saviour of Canada's social democrats. The new leader, youthful, stylish, Sikh, and often beturbaned in dazzling colours, seemed to embody a multi-ethnic, forward-looking country — Canada's answer to Barack Obama, or, for that matter, the NDP's answer to a similarly hip Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Singh's campaign had signed up a ton of new members to the NDP who propelled him to victory. That his policy ideas were vague and his political experience shallow — Singh had never served in the federal legislature — didn't seem to matter. The party had just ditched the stolid sexagenarian Thomas Mulcair although he had led the party to its second-highest number of seats ever in the 2015 general election and was a strong performer during Question Period in the House of Commons. But Singh rode bicycles and practiced Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Maybe he could fight the boxer Trudeau.

Today, all that hope lies in tatters. Singh isn't anyone's saviour, least of all those hoping his party might actually amount to something in Canadian politics. Singh has consistently appeared unprepared and not really serious. He had to pause a media interview to ask a colleague what the NDP's position was on a piece of legislation related to firearms. His view on the party's policy in Venezuela appears to be at odds with his own foreign affairs spokesperson. If an election were held today, polling predicts the NDP would win about 26 seats out of 338.

The NDP's lost opportunity

Singh finally secured a seat in the federal parliament after winning a by-election last month. Tellingly, members of Canada's Conservative Party

were hoping he'd lose — not because they're afraid of him, but because if he lost the by-election, the party would still have time to choose a new and more promising leader before the next federal election in October. Conservatives do well in Canada when the progressive vote is split between the Liberal Party and the NDP. An NDP collapse means more votes for the Liberals.

Even worse, the NDP should use an opportunity to make gains at the expense of Trudeau's Liberals, who are mired in a scandal. It involves allegations that Trudeau's government inappropriately pressured Canada's attorney general to help engineering giant SNC-Lavalin avoid a criminal trial on bribery charges. The scandal has shaken Trudeau and led to the resignation of his chief advisor. But Singh's approval rating has barely budged. Almost one third of Singh's incumbent MPs have announced they won't run in the next election, scheduled for October.

Singh's shortcomings should have been apparent to NDP party members when they chose a new leader in 2017.

There are lessons here for progressive parties far beyond Canada. Donald Trump's improbable victory, first over his Republican rivals for the party's presidential nomination and then in the American presidential election itself, surprised almost all political commentators and seemed to overturn conventional wisdom about what it takes to win elections in America. Trump was an outsider. He had never held public office. His policy pronouncements were brash, grandiose, convoluted and often illogical. But he excited people, inspiring fierce, sometimes disturbing, loyalty.

Too late for a change

One could observe similar trends in progressive political circles even before Trump's triumph, but they certainly intensified afterwards: a desire to fight fire with fire, outsiders with outsiders. Consider Bernie Sanders' almost-successful run to supplant the Democratic establishment favourite Hilary Clinton as the 2016 Democratic nominee for president. He became a member of the party only to run for president under its banner. But he could fill stadiums. He still does. He's going to try again in 2020.

Consider, also, Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party in Britain. He had been a long-time member of Parliament when he ran for the party's leadership in 2015. But he was an outsider, garnering support for his campaign from fewer Labour parliamentarians than any other candidate.

But Corbyn, like Trump, like Sanders, was popular with the party's base and, in part, won thanks to the backing of new party members who presumably signed up for the purpose of supporting him.

Comparisons between Singh, Trump, Corbyn, and Sanders are, of course, loose. And Singh, it must be said, is no firebrand. His platform is as centrist as NDP platforms go. But like Trump, Corbyn, and Sanders, he pulled off a political upset with the support of those outside his party's establishment.

This is not to say a party should close itself to new ideas and people. Too often political parties stagnate. But to swing far in the opposite direction — by placing hope in untested people or movements — is risky and potentially self-destructive. The strategy worked for American Republicans in 2015 but is unlikely to do the same elsewhere.

Singh's shortcomings should have been apparent to NDP party members when they chose a new leader in 2017. They were instead blinded by his novelty. Singh might have made a solid MP. He might even have made a good party leader after he had been an MP for a few years. It's too late for that now. The NDP will flounder in the October election and then try to rebuild. Social democratic parties elsewhere would do well to learn from this mistake.



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