

# ★ THE ★ FINAL › CAMPAIGN ‹

EXPERIENCE, NAME RECOGNITION AND A LIFETIME OF SERVICE COULDN'T SAVE AMARJEET SOHI FROM A HARSH POLITICAL RECKONING. WRITER **CURTIS GILLESPIE** EXAMINES WHAT WENT WRONG FOR THE MAYOR AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT THE MOOD OF OUR CITY.

PHOTOGRAPHY ADRIEN VECZAN



# ON THE EVENING OF APRIL 28, A LITTLE AFTER 10 P.M., AMARJEET SOHI, THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE FOR THE FEDERAL RIDING OF EDMONTON SOUTHEAST, ENTERED THE ROYAL PALACE BANQUET HALL.

A large and majority Indo-Canadian crowd had been waiting for a couple of hours, dining on some excellent curry and watching election results come in across two giant screens. They were there to cheer on Sohi's hoped-for return to Ottawa and, if so, almost assuredly a cabinet post.

Sohi had a lot going for him, considering Prime Minister Mark Carney personally asked him to relinquish the mayor's chair to run in the newly created riding of Edmonton Southeast (a split from the former Edmonton Mill Woods riding, now Edmonton Southeast and Gateway). It seemed wise on Carney's part and, although Sohi was coy about it, it was a no-brainer for the mayor too. After all, Carney had re-energized the toxic Liberal brand, Donald Trump was creating all manner of trouble for Pierre Poilievre and the Conservatives, and Sohi, reading the municipal tea leaves which had him polling at 26 per cent approval last year, had to have known a second mayoral term was a long shot. And so, back into federal politics he jumped.

But as the numbers rolled in on election night, it was clear that the voters of Edmonton Southeast were only slightly more impressed with his record than the rest of the city. In the end, his record and name recognition counted for nothing — if not less than nothing. Sohi would end up losing to Conservative Jagsharan Singh Mahal by nearly 7,000 votes. In Edmonton Gateway, the Liberal candidate, a virtual unknown named Jeremy Hoefsloot, pulled almost the same vote percentage as Sohi. (He lost to Conservative Tim Uppal, who beat Sohi in 2019 and is now back in Ottawa as an MP for the fifth time.) If someone as unknown as Hoefsloot could match someone as well-known as Sohi, that doesn't say much for the mayor's reputation, political machine or vast well of experience.

In the media scrum after his post-defeat speech, a reporter asked Sohi if he had any insights about the humiliating result. He said only that they would analyze the data later. But the truth is that no analysis is required. The loss was not due to Liberal fatigue, given the party's triumphant comeback. Nor could Sohi claim that voters didn't have enough time to get to know him. It surely wasn't due to an electrifying campaign from his inexperienced Conservative opponent, a candidate who appears to have only run a competent campaign without much fanfare.

The plain fact is that Amarjeet Sohi lost because he's unpopular.

Yet even that doesn't quite cut to the heart of the matter.

The real question is, why did a man widely regarded as a solid and experienced public servant, a candidate so strong that the prime minister made a point of asking him to run, so wholly fail to inspire voters?

**I HAD VISITED WITH SOHI** at his campaign office a week before the election. The energy was good at headquarters and at the doors of his would-be constituents. He appeared confident when I asked him about the roots of his passion for community service.

"I don't think it was a moment," he said. "It was more of a progression of my work as a community activist." He recalled what it was like for him to move to Edmonton in the early 1980s as a 17- or 18-year-old with almost no insight into the Canadian way of life. "I couldn't speak English, and I faced a lot of barriers," he said. "But what I remember is that Edmonton helped newcomers integrate. I have always had a deep appreciation for community organizations and services. They need to be supported and strengthened."

Sohi embraced the values and practices of his second home to a degree that many birthright Canadians take for granted. A core element of his political temperament was forged during his time as a political prisoner in the late 1980s. Sohi, a young Sikh with artistic aspirations, returned to the Indian province of Punjab during political unrest to study community theatre and explore his homeland through the new lens of equality he'd acquired in Canada. Indian authorities, however, were on high alert due to the Khalistani movement agitating for an independent Sikh state in Punjab. Although Sohi was in fact a secular with anti-fundamentalist views, the government accused him of travelling to India to train with Khalistani terrorists. He was jailed.

His family feared the worst, knowing that people too often disappeared into the sinkhole of the Indian extra-legal system. But remarkably, a CSIS officer did some informal research and found no suspicious activity on Sohi's part. His findings became a foreign policy *cause célèbre* and Mill Woods Progressive Conservative MP David Kilgour wrote to India's high commissioner and prime minister requesting the charges be dropped.

Despite these interventions on his behalf, it still took 21 months for Sohi to be released — 21 months during which he was interrogated, beaten and had to go on a hunger strike to gain access to improved food and library materials. After he was freed,

## INDIA'S GOVERNMENT ACCUSED YOUNG SOHI OF TERRORISM AND JAILED HIM.

Sohi returned to Edmonton. He has rarely spoken of how the experience changed him other than to say that Canada and Edmonton have made him who he is. After years of driving a taxi, then a bus, he ran for City Council in 2004. He lost, ran again in 2007, won, took a run at federal politics in 2015, won one election, lost another, took some time off, then returned to local politics, vying for the empty chair in the centre of council chambers.

Though it was only four years ago, he launched his mayoral campaign during a period of considerable societal distress as we grappled with the fallout of COVID-19. Against a backdrop of misinformation, blame, trauma and fear, Sohi's low-key and



undramatic style suited the public's need for stability and certainty. In interview after interview, he emphasized addressing issues of mental health, addiction, poverty and homelessness, and for this he won the 2021 election handily. But the years that followed have been complicated, to say the least.

"The electorate is just grumpy," Dave Cournoyer, a longtime commentator on Alberta's municipal and provincial politics, told me. "They're frustrated with the state of the city, with inflation, with rising property taxes, with affordable housing and probably some leftover frustration coming out of the pandemic restrictions. Whoever became mayor was going to bear the brunt of all that frustration."

Part of the issue, says Cournoyer, is that Sohi was immediately saddled with extremely large capital projects, such as the LRT expansion and significant infrastructure repairs. He also inherited issues such as bike lane bickering, which were small in fiscal terms but large in the public consciousness (and grew larger as the populace returned to office work). The UCP government has also taken to increasingly sticking its nose into municipal affairs on big and small ticket items (including Bill 20: the Municipal Affairs Statutes Amendment Act, 2024, which allows for party affiliations on municipal election ballots for the first time this fall) and that, says Cournoyer, has not made council's job any easier. None of these things were Sohi's fault or idea particularly, and some of them he has had no control over, but as mayor, they are nevertheless his responsibility and therefore his problem.

Sohi's methods and manner may not have helped manage his quandary. Perhaps during the pandemic his "steady hand on the wheel" approach was appreciated, but something more combative and bolder might have served him better. Stephen Mandel and Don Iveson were big personalities. Sohi was not. He wants to be collaborative and inclusive, but perhaps trying to work collectively with so many diverse interest groups made it seem that he didn't have any ideas or juice of his own, that he was a bureaucrat forever reacting rather than a leader blazing a trail. "There just never seemed to be enough direction from the mayor's office," says Cournoyer. "And there's no doubt that his time as mayor

wore down his reputation and probably cost him more than it helped him during the federal campaign."

Much of the country gravitated to Carney's Liberals on the promise of stability, moderation and, you could argue, the status quo in the face of Trump's tariffs and "51st State" taunts, but that was not the political story out here. Albertans wanted change, and Sohi, ever the moderate, was not seen as an agent of change.

**"I AM NOT DRIVEN BY IDEOLOGIES,"** Sohi told me the week before the election. "Regardless of which party, a politician's focus should always remain people, to serve them and make their lives better. I'm a good example that when you actually invest in people, you not only help them to be successful in their life but you are building their capacity to give back to your community."

Those who have become close with Sohi over the years have often remarked on his compassion, his concern for community, inclusion and his belief in equality. When he has spoken on the campaign trail during his numerous runs for elected office, his words have often carried a thoughtfulness and rarely sounded rote or canned. And accepting that it's hard to ever truly know for certain, the warmth he radiates in person seems authentic.

Yet for all his ability to connect with people, for all his laudable impulses to serve, for all that his nature seems genuine, the reality is that he has failed multiple times over his career to ignite voters as a group. One has to wonder if his integrity, his principles, his values — to be brief, whatever essential decency you ascribe to him — have made him a good politician rather than a successful one. The two are rarely the same.

Politics is a ruthless blood sport. Roughly since Pericles of Athens, politicians have been telling voters on the campaign trail that it's their job to represent all people and not just the ones who voted for them; that we only succeed when we all work together; and that community comes first. (Oh, and that they are agents of change.) Sometimes they might even believe those things. But mostly politics and political races are about winning. As I recall Rod Love, Ralph Klein's long-time chief of staff, telling me when I interviewed him many years ago, "Principles in politics are wonderful, but they don't mean fuck all if you're not in power. If you're in power, great, then go ahead and talk all day about your principles. But if you're not in power, fuck off."

The expletive-free version of that is, "nice guys finish last."

Amarjeet Sohi, by all accounts a nice guy, hasn't always finished last and has won often enough that his principles and values have had a positive impact on his community. But why, then, does his political career as a councillor, member of Parliament and especially as mayor feel faintly underwhelming? Is it him? Or is it us?

The answer, of course, is both. We regularly bemoan the polarized, tribal, nasty, shallow state of politics and yet when candidates of substance and honesty raise their hands, too often we consider them dull and uninspiring. Sohi has always operated generally in a spirit of modesty. But is modesty a virtue in the political sphere? Or is it just dull? Do we want people in power whom we trust or who excite us?

All we know is that the numbers are the numbers and they indicate that voters increasingly viewed Sohi more as a political relic than a vehicle of forward progress. "Currently," says Cournoyer, "the most valuable currency in politics is shamelessness." If true, that doesn't bode well for centre-left candidate Andrew

Knack, who is trying to balance a socially progressive platform — emphasizing affordable housing and mental-health services — with a “back-to-basics” focus on growth, affordability and safety, all anchored by his smiling “nice guy” persona. Running as an independent, the three-term city councillor has called the new model of partisan municipal slates “poison,” warning it will bring fighting and negativity to council. As he told Real Talk host Ryan Jespersen the morning after his campaign launch, “I don’t think you have to become a fighter to get things done in politics.”

On the other hand, Tim Cartmell, the apparent mayoral front-runner who founded the centre-right Better Edmonton Party, seems to recognize the unpopularity of Sohi’s discreet approach with his promise to “fix what’s broken” and “get shit done.” Yet, when you drill down on Cartmell’s platform, it’s even more boilerplate than Knack’s: a promise to focus on basic services, to create safe streets, to practice fiscal responsibility, to identify inefficiencies and to create a 100-day post-election action plan to look at safety, snow clearing and road construction. Whatever he lacks in imagination, he makes up for in scrappiness and self-assurance. If Sohi possesses these qualities at all, he doesn’t like to show them. His humility, it seems, is too entrenched.

During our interview, he told me a story about his first federal run in 2015, which seemed to embody his distaste for political theatre. During the campaign, his 101-year-old father took Sohi aside and said to him, “I know you are worried you’re not going to win, but I want you to remember that what you say today and what you say during this election is going to reflect on you and who you are. Do not do anything that you will end up regretting.”

**BACK AT THE ROYAL PALACE** for the election night party that never was, I took a moment to speak with a couple of Sohi supporters named Randeep Dhaliwal and Deepak Sondhi. Dhaliwal told me that politics has always been Sohi’s passion. “It doesn’t matter if he wins or loses tonight,” said Dhaliwal. (It was still early in the night, before the numbers finally told us which one of those it was going to be.) “He’ll always be serving his community. He wants to serve the public.”

Sondhi agreed. “Remember, he started as a bus driver. Then a councillor, then a federal minister, then Mayor. I didn’t support him because he was a Liberal or a Conservative or whatever. I supported him because he’s a friend of the community. Fingers crossed!”

Crossed fingers didn’t help. By 9:15 p.m., the mood in the room felt conflicted. It seemed clear by then that the Liberals would win, but not with Edmonton Southeast. It was now simply about waiting for Sohi to arrive and make a speech acknowledging the reality of the result. But by 9:45, he still had not shown up. At 10 p.m., big groups of people began to leave. You could almost see and hear people asking themselves, *Where is he?*

Then the giant televisions showing the election results started glitching and, almost eerily, the ballroom lights began flickering. The metaphor (the bulb of Sohi’s once-bright political career powering off) was as obvious as it was uncanny.

Sohi finally arrived about a quarter past ten. After shaking a few hands and giving out a few hugs, he went to a stage festooned with his campaign’s posters and banners, the whole production now looking more sorrowful than festive. Once at the microphone, he signalled to his staff to shut off the televisions still blaring away in the corner. For some inexplicable reason, no one seemed able to do so. After a moment, the screens went blank but the sound remained on and somehow louder. The sound finally



went off but the lights above him kept popping and crackling. If ever there was a series of signals that perhaps this was not meant to be, here it was.

The whole thing was shambolic. And yet, despite undoubtedly just wanting to get it all over with, Sohi kept his cool and handled his concession speech, and the media scrum that followed, graciously. He had referred to his future previously, but when asked by reporters what his City Hall plans were, Sohi reiterated, firmly and formally, that he would be finishing his term out as mayor and would not run again. He seemed to take a beat to absorb the full meaning of the statement, that this may in fact have been his final campaign.

When he finally left the stage and began moving through the hug line toward the exit door, I expected him to go through these motions and then call it a night — and a career. But to my surprise he didn’t rush at all. He lingered, looked people in the eye, made each person feel noticed and appreciated ... all while the lights in the room continued to flicker like a bartender flashing the house lights at last call.

Once he made his way through the line of supporters, Sohi found himself strategically situated by the exit door leading out to the foyer and the parking lot. I imagined his staff had planned it that way. But instead of proceeding through the exit, he turned the other direction, towards the bar and the main part of the banquet hall. There were still quite a few people standing and sitting around in pods of four or five. As Sohi moved deeper into the room, he kept circulating, making his way from group to group, exchanging handshakes and conversations, until he’d basically settled in with the crowd, drinking what looked like a double shot of straight whisky.

At that point, for reasons I am wholly unable to explain, the lights in the room began to work again. The flickering stopped. A kind of calm returned to the room.

By now, it was close to 11 p.m. and yet Sohi continued to seek out every single person remaining in the hall. If this had been a week prior to the election I would’ve simply passed it off as a politician working a room. But the election was over. He’d lost badly. The biggest humiliation of his political career. I wondered if a part of him was relieved at the result, unburdened by the pressure and expectation.

I felt I had seen all I needed to see. It was close to 11:30 p.m. The screens were off. The banquet hall staff were clearing the buffet table. About 50 people were milling about. Among them, a campaign volunteer stacking signs in a rather forlorn pile on the stage, and the mayor himself, laughing during what appeared to be a light-hearted conversation. As I left The Royal Palace, I couldn’t help wondering if he might end up being the last person to leave. **ED.**



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