

INTERNATIONAL

Events move notch further on diversity

BY MANSOOR LADHA
SPECIAL TO THE ADVOCATE

The year 2022 has been an eventful year. Britain has had a Christian king, Hindu Prime Minister, and a Muslim mayor. How things have changed! As a journalism student in London in 1970, I was chased by Skinheads, brandishing chains and shouting Paki, Paki, on the Main Street. Paki used to be a common standard term used for people of colour whether they hail from Pakistan or not.

This was also the time when British Conservative politician Enoch Powell was at his best fueling the racial pyre by igniting it with anti-immigrant rhetoric. Powell was against immigration from former British colonies, envisaging river of blood flowing in Britain.

Rishi Sunak has changed the political scene of Britain by assuming the highest post in the land. No 10 Downing Street celebrated the occasion with Indian delicacies while London Mayor Sadiq Khan was seen celebrating the Hindu festival of light, Diwali, while Indian women danced in the foreground. I wouldn't be surprised if PM Sunak would serve samosas and butter chicken during his first cabinet meeting.

This is also the century which has seen the U.S. elect the first black president in Barack Obama and appoint Kamala Harris, a woman of Indian/Jamaican heritage, as vice-president. Harris is the first woman to hold the second highest office in the country.

Closer to home in Calgary, the electorate elected the first Muslim mayor of a large city in Naheed Nenshi. I remember candidate Nenshi being asked by a reporter whether Calgary was ready for a Muslim mayor. The question was not only ridiculous but also inappropriate. No religious affiliations of the two other candidates standing against Nenshi were mentioned or questioned.

More recently, Alberta made history by having the first Shia Ismaili Muslim as Lieutenant Governor with the appointment of Kampala-born Salma Lakhani. Alberta's two major cities - Edmonton and Calgary - elected mayors of colour: Amarjeet Sochi (Edmonton) and Jyoti Gondek (Calgary), both of Asian heritage. Other people of colour have served at municipal level as an expression of service to their communities and country.

All the above clearly indicates that diversity has moved a notch further and that electorate in the 21st century is willing to elect people of colour as long as they are qualified for the job. The electors have matured in their thinking and have adopted non-partial opinions, rejecting stereotypical thinking about people of colour.

I believe that a colour-blind political system is possible in modern times. It shows that the community is becoming more receptive to seeing diverse candidates presenting themselves in a positive light. It has sent a signal that the community has undergone an important transformation, translating

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—MANSOOR LADHA

into a positive electoral politics. It also reveals that the electorate is willing to accept diversity in the country and is willing to elect people representing the population makeup of the country we live in.

While accepting that immigrants in Canada have contributed enormously in the development of the country, it's unfortunate that the country's brand as a welcoming nation of opportunity for immigrants is at risk, according to Victor Dodig president and CEO of Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. In an article in the Financial Post on Oct. 24, 2022, he pointed out that Canada's immigration faces problems such as housing affordability, employers not paying enough and lack of accreditation for foreign professionals.

Without immigration, Canada's working-age population would be shrinking by 150,000 people every year. This would present significant challenges that all Canadians would feel since 60 per cent of GDP growth comes from population growth. "We also face an aging population, coupled with a pandemic that accelerated retirements. A recent Statistics Canada survey showed that Canada's median age has been increasing steadily since 1971 — a trend just reversed this year through immigration."

His prescription for the "sickness" facing Canada which would ensure Canada's reputation as a welcoming nation of opportunity was that the country must ensure housing is affordable for newcomers as well as for those saving for a home and looking to start out in life.

Secondly, he said Canada must ensure newcomers can participate meaningfully in the labour market with a job that suits their skills. That means moving faster to recognize skills and accreditations and thirdly, Canada must ensure all newcomers have an opportunity to earn a living wage.

"We need to think bigger about immigration. We may need to increase Canada's target from the current 400,000 people a year to give us the population density, human capital and capacity to be a leader in the new economy," he said.

Mansoor Ladha is a Calgary-based journalist, travel writer and author of Memoirs of a Muhindi: Fleeing East Africa for the West and Portrait in Pluralism: Aga Khan's Shia Ismaili Muslims.

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