

CANADA: OUR TIME TO LEAD EIGHT DISCUSSIONS WE NEED TO HAVE

MULTICULTURALISM

‘Standing on the sidelines is not an option

With increasing numbers of immigrants arriving every year from Asia, the Caribbean and other parts of the world, Canada’s urban demographic makeup is undergoing a profound shift. **Marina Jimenez** talks with six emerging leaders from this new demographic, and their thoughts on immigration, philanthropy, success and influence in their adopted homeland.

HUSSAIN AMARSHI PRESIDENT OF MONGREL MEDIA



Hussain Amarshi grew up in eastern Africa and in Pakistan. ERIN ELDER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Hussain Amarshi is president of Mongrel Media. He named the film distribution company for a Salman Rushdie essay that talks about the growing mongrelization of the world. As a devotee of foreign and alternative film, he’s been called a film visionary, as well as a modest mogul, and has supported such projects as Deepa Mehta’s *Water*.

Why and when did you move to Canada?

I came to Toronto in 1984. I grew up in eastern Africa, and in Pakistan.

What was your biggest challenge?

Just before coming to Canada, I was working at Exxon Chemicals in Pakistan in an entry-level management position. I soon realized when I came to Canada that I would have to start from scratch. During the summer of 1984, I ended up taking four different minimum-wage jobs and worked over 100 hours a week to save enough money to go to school in the fall.

What are the barriers people from diverse backgrounds face in becoming leaders?

We as a culture have a patroniz-

ing attitude towards immigration. We “allow” immigrants to come to the country as an act of beneficence. We have this misguided notion that immigrants take away services, jobs, etc. from the people who have been here for a long time. The reality is that Canada has been built by immigrants.

What personal experience captures the definition of being a Canadian?

Being in Toronto in the midst of the FIFA World Cup. You have the freedom and the luxury to cheer for a sport that is not native to the country; to sport flags from multiple countries; to change your allegiances based on who is winning the tournament; and to end your day with O Canada.

What is your advice for other newcomers?

There is no going back. Even if you find yourself unable to achieve the goals you have set for yourself, the fact of just being here will change you. By recognizing and claiming this country as your home you can move forward. Canada is a work in progress that will continue to evolve as more immigrants take their rightful place.

INDIRA SAMARASEKERA PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA



Indira Samarasekera left Sri Lanka for the U.S., then moved to Vancouver. MICHAEL HOLLY/U OF A

Indira Samarasekera is the president of the University of Alberta, one of the country’s leading metallurgical engineers, and a recipient of the Order of Canada. She is not just a woman from Sri Lanka who has reached the exalted heights of the academy, but she did so in a field that has traditionally been a strong male preserve.

When did you come to Canada?

My husband and I immigrated to Vancouver in January, 1977, from the U.S., where we had moved two years earlier from Sri Lanka. It was the best decision of our lives.

What was the biggest challenge?

Here, people challenge the status quo more, seek out and question, more than one would in any Asian society, where authority is highly respected and people tend to follow rules more readily. That was difficult to get used to at first.

What are the barriers people from diverse backgrounds face in becoming leaders?

I think we are seeing many more visible minorities in leadership positions. Of the 10 major Canadian universities, three presi-

dents are visible minorities. There is growing representation in academia, including many vice-presidents.

Who do you hang out with?

I have a lot of friends, they are mostly friends I have had for 30 years since I first have come to Canada, the parents of my children’s close friends, people I stood around the hockey rink and soccer field with. Those roots run deep and have endured. I am also friends with my professional colleagues, many of whom are male. I have friends from every culture: Jewish, German, European, Canadian.

What is your advice to others?

There is no other country in the world where immigrants have had so much opportunity and have achieved so much. I can tell you that from talking to immigrants who have been to Australia and the United Kingdom. Canada has captured a particular style of welcoming immigrants and integrating them. If we want to recruit more skilled immigrants, we must show that those who come here can have the opportunity to fulfill their potential. Otherwise, it is really a waste of human talent.

ADITYA JHA ENTREPRENEUR AND PHILANTHROPIST



Aditya Jha moved to Canada from Singapore 16 years ago. ERIN ELDER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Aditya Jha, 53, co-founded a technology company in Toronto in 1999, and sold it to Sun Microsystems for \$100-million (U.S.) two years later. He went on to found a charity, POA Educational Foundation, aimed at nurturing entrepreneurialism among natives.

When did you come to Canada?

I came here 16 years ago via Singapore. I originally moved from India.

What are the barriers people from diverse backgrounds face in becoming leaders?

I think the barrier is not one of talent. CEOs have no doubt about the abilities of individuals. But institutional recognition has not happened. Political correctness is holding us back. They are short-selling immigrants in a way. I don’t want to have quotas or be the ‘Indo-Canadian’ quota. I want to be accepted for my own competency.

Do you have a motto?

I believe in karma. If you are given something, the purpose is to share it with others, with humility.

Advice to other newcomers?

You hear how bias in the system doesn’t allow you to succeed. But you can crack that bias if you are very determined. The system is still by and large more merit-oriented and more bottom-line oriented than our own countries. There is no system of castes or class. I have never had any discrimination. Most newcomers are coming from more hierarchical, influence-peddling societies, with more built-in injustices and barriers.

What personal experience captures the definition of being a Canadian?

Watching my son grow up. He was born here and he in every way acts and thinks like a Canadian. He belongs to this water. That speaks volumes of this society.

RATNA OMIIDVAR PRESIDENT OF MAYTREE



Ratna Omidvar fled Iran with her husband to move to Canada in 1981. ERIN ELDER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Ratna Omidvar, 60, is the president of Maytree, a private foundation that promotes equity and prosperity through leadership-building. She has changed the way Canada treats immigrants, persuading the powerful that the country is losing billions every year because its immigrants are underemployed.

Why and when did you move to Canada?

My husband and I moved to Canada in 1981. We fled from Iran.

What was your biggest challenge?

Figuring out the rules of engagement: what to say, what not to say, should we emphasize our qualifications, or de-emphasize them. Getting a job was the biggest challenge. We had to reinvent ourselves.

What personal experience captures the definition of being a Canadian?

In my very early years in Canada,

my daughter was a member of a volunteer-run rhythmic gymnastics club and we did everything, from governance to making sandwiches. The group was made up of people from every corner of the world, and the interest of our children in this sport created a wonderful bond. This was my first settlement experience and I wonder why we don’t use sport more as a “bridging” opportunity.

What is your advice for other newcomers?

I speak to at least five or more immigrants every week. First, I tell them to keep their names. But I also tell them that we must live up to our end, work hard, learn the ropes and the language, take comfort from our community ties but also reach out, and make new friends. Obey the law of the land, even when these collide with personal values. Be open to new ideas, and not live in bubbles that hold us hostage to old ways of thinking. Standing on the sidelines is not an option for anyone, and definitely not an option for immigrants.

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CAMILLE ORRIDGE CEO OF LOCAL HEALTH INTEGRATION NETWORK



Camille Orridge came to Canada from Jamaica in 1967. ERIN ELDER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Camille Orridge, 63, is the newly appointed CEO of the Toronto Central Local Health Integration Network, and a powerful and passionate advocate for social change. She co-founded Pathways to Education, the remarkably successful stay-in-school program for high-school students.

When did you come to Canada?

I came on Dec. 3, 1967, from Jamaica, joining my mother and aunt. I began working as a ward clerk at Toronto General Hospital. I am the first person in my family to go to university.

What has been your biggest challenge?

In the beginning, you expect the racism. But as you become educated, and advance and move into the middle class, you still hear comments about people who live in [social] housing. We all started out in housing, and we all did well. I came from a poor family in Jamaica. I can still hear my mother saying, "The poor will always be the poor, but why should it always be the same family?" Education is the key to social mobility. Traditional black families come from slavery and that's how we made it out, by engaging as communities.

Who are your heroes?

My heroes are the old black women and the immigrant women. They get up at 4 a.m. and they get on the bus and they do those menial jobs, and yet still they care, they love and they laugh. They don't get beaten down. I walk on the street and I look at their faces and I see the resiliency that has helped them to survive. Those are the faces I look at when I feel tired.

What is your motto?

I won't be boxed in by anyone else's perceptions about what I can or cannot do.

Who do you hang out with?

I have a mixture of friends, Ismailis, Jewish, Muslim and Caribbeans. We're all on the fringes of our various cultural groups and we don't quite fit in. We are all social activists.

What is your advice to other newcomers?

Don't assume citizenship is a right. We have to join in and belong, and fight to maintain what Canada has. With citizenship comes responsibilities, not just privileges. We must participate in the political system.

ROBERT FUNG PRESIDENT OF THE SALIENT GROUP



Robert Fung was born in Canada. His dad is a Trinidadian-born Chinese. JOHN LEHMANN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Robert Fung, founder and president of the Salient Group, is one of Vancouver's most influential businessmen, as well as a philanthropist. His company focuses on the reuse of heritage buildings, and on restoring and creating vibrant communities in the city.

Why and when did you move to Canada?

I was born and raised in Etobicoke, Ont., to a Trinidadian-born Chinese father and a Nova Scotian mother with Irish roots.

What was your biggest challenge?

Being one of the only kids in my school of Chinese ancestry, it was difficult understanding that others felt I was different, while I didn't.

What are the barriers people from diverse backgrounds face in becoming leaders?

I believe that we are on the cusp of a sea change in the face of our leadership. Be it age, sex or ancestry, leadership is evolving. The historic entitlement to leadership that has been held by our traditional Anglo base is evolving as their kids' circles of influence expand.

What impact have you made on your community, and on wider Canadian society?

Through my business and community work, I have helped bring recognition to the importance of our heritage in revitalizing neighbourhoods and bolstering local economies and social health. Vancouver's Downtown Eastside is our most dynamic and exciting neighbourhood because of its cultural, social and economic diversity. However, it has only been through significant private investment and public discussion that the cultural value of this area has been recognized.

Who are the future voices of Canada?

Our Western youth have an incredible connection to global issues. The current school-age generation is fluent in Western as well as Asian/South-Asian languages and culture. It is becoming seamless. As the global economy shifts east, the strength of our historic connections will merge with the strengths of our emerging demographic to create a power of dialogue and business potential.

IN DEPTH, ONLINE

» **Video:** Our expert panel debates the pros and cons of multiculturalism in Canada. Posted at noon ET.

» **Debate:** Join the conversation through our comment threads.

» **Quiz:** How well do you know the Canadian multicultural mosaic?

» **Poll:** What's the best way to ensure immigrant success?

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THE SERIES

Over eight weeks, The Globe is exploring eight issues that will challenge our country in the next decade and beyond. The hope is to spark a discussion that begins in our pages, but ultimately lives beyond them. We invite you to participate – at the dinner table, the water cooler, via e-mail and on our website. We hope it will

become a call to action for the leader in all of us.

- » **This week:** Multiculturalism
- » **Oct. 9-15:** Women in power
- » **Oct. 16-22:** Failing boys
- » **Oct. 23-29:** Future of the military
- » **Oct. 30-Nov. 5:** Work-life balance

- » **Nov. 6-12:** Private health care
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- » **Nov. 20-26:** Global food

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