



Innovation Minister Navdeep Bains with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a Kitchener innovation event in 2016. Trudeau pointed out that he had more Sikhs in his cabinet (four), than in the cabinet of India (two). *Adam Scotti photo*

Nation-Building Through Diversity and Inclusion

Navdeep Bains

On April 17, 1985, Section 15 of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms came into effect, ensuring that in this country, individuals cannot be discriminated against on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. Those words are an expression of Canadian values, not just for the huge number of individuals directly protected by them but for an entire nation. Innovation Minister Navdeep Bains is among the millions of Canadians for whom those values are deeply personal.

I am a Canadian Sikh born and raised in Toronto. My mother worked the night shift at a cookie factory, but she was always home every morning to tie my turban. I have had many good turban days because of her.

I am also a child of the Charter. I belong to the generation of Canadians who came of age under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms—a foundational accomplishment in our nation-building. Our country's diversity and the values of openness and inclusion made the Char-

ter possible. In return, the Charter reinforces those values, which make our country even stronger.

I was a teenager when the Charter first became real to me. It was 1989 and Baltej Singh Dhillon became the first Sikh Canadian to be accepted into the RCMP—on the condition that he choose between his duty and religion. Duty to the RCMP required a clean-shaven face and wearing the standard headgear. But as a Sikh, Dhillon had a beard and wore a turban.

When Dhillon chose to defend his religious rights, it was the first time I saw someone who looked like me speak so publicly about my faith. I was moved by his courage and conviction.

Dhillon's appeals to the RCMP Commissioner triggered months of heated debate and protest across the country. In March 1990, the Commissioner, citing the Charter, finally agreed to allow beards and turbans to be part of the force's dress code. And Baltej Singh Dhillon forever changed the face of the iconic Canadian Mountie.

As a young Canadian following Dhillon's story, I was filled with pride that the Charter had prevailed. But it also opened my eyes to the challenges of living in a pluralistic society. I learned that acceptance of difference is a constant conversation, an ongoing negotiation. Inclusion needs to be nurtured and openness defended.

This year marks our nation's 150th birthday and the 35th anniversary of the Charter—milestones that serve as reminders that we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. Everyday heroes such as Baltej Singh Dhillon paved the way for the freedoms that we sometimes take for granted. That includes the freedom to practise religion without having to choose between faith and career.

Years after his victory, Dhillon said: "We still have a lot of work to do in

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the building of this country. Being of strong character, having confidence in your abilities and anchoring them in the legacy of your lineage are prerequisites for those who want to contribute.”

I am in public life today in part because I was inspired by Dhillon. I want to do my part to defend Charter rights and promote equality of opportunity for everyone. That's why in 2005, I voted in favour of same-sex marriage legislation in the House, despite opposition from faith communities, including my own. That's why in 2011, I took a stand to defend the kirpan when Quebec legislators pushed for a ban in the provincial legislature.

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That's why in 2015, when the government of the day took steps to ban women from wearing a niqab while taking the citizenship oath, I

opposed the move. And that's why earlier this year, I supported our government's Motion 103, which called on all parliamentarians to condemn Islamophobia.

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I am also proud to put the values of openness, diversity and inclusion into action. My first act as a cabinet minister was to reinstate the mandatory long-form census, which was eliminated under the previous government. This important survey of our population enables us to measure our nation's progress in reflecting the diversity of our communities. Without the census, we are blind to the gaps that fuel inequality in all aspects of our daily lives.

I have also introduced legislation that promotes more women, cultural minorities and other underrepresented groups to the highest levels of leadership in corporate Canada. The comply-or-explain provisions of Bill C-25 would put pressure on the country's publicly traded companies to better reflect the diversity of their shareholders, customers and communities in which these companies do business.

I firmly believe it is Canada's moral duty to promote diversity and inclusion. These values also make good business sense. As other parts of the

world turn inward, I'm proud that Canada remains open to people from all backgrounds, whether they are refugees from war-torn countries or highly skilled professionals in high-growth industries. Our open society has attracted generations of innovators and entrepreneurs who have found in Canada a place to fulfill their potential.

Our country benefits from the talent and hard work of newcomers, who contribute by creating jobs, opportunity and prosperity for Canadians. We are a stronger country as a result. Indeed, our diversity gives Canadians a competitive edge in a global economy that depends on people's ability to navigate through different cultures and languages.

Diversity also drives innovation, which depends on good ideas that come from the largest talent pool possible—a global pool. That's why I

have championed our government's Global Skills Strategy, which enables Canadian companies to more quick-

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ly and easily recruit highly skilled, in-demand talent from around the world.

For Canada to succeed over the next 150 years, we must continue to engage in nation building based on the strength of our diversity and the values of openness and inclusion. Our future prosperity depends on them. **P**

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