

## PANEL 4: POLITICS

### Sofia Kaur

[inaudible] I'm just opening this panel in the indigenous language of Maori in New Zealand. Um, because this next panel, is sort of about, uh, how do we take migration, how do we take entrepreneurship, how do we take business and how do we take politics, um, and use all of that, uh, in service of not just our community, but those that we owe our allyship to, um, and the wider society that we live as a part of. Um, I'd like to welcome our wonderful panellists up onto the stage. I'm just going to introduce them as they come up. So as I say, your name will be great to have you up. So Mr John Arkin, uh, who is the first Australian born Sikh counselor for Woolgoolga [Applause] And Mr. Kanwaljit Singh Bakshi who's the first Indian Sikh MP in New Zealand. [Applause] And finally the wonderful Mr Inderjit Singh, who is a former MP for the People's Action Party who we've just heard from. [Applause] You'll notice that we actually have four chairs here. So, um, previously, uh, if you've been following, uh, what sort of been going on. Alex Patala was also scheduled to be on our panel today, but unfortunately due to some personal circumstances, she won't be joining us. Um, but, but we have a wealth of knowledge and experience here. Um, in that place, Alrighty, historically speaking, um, politics has been a really big part of securing the Sikh community. Um, but we're seeing that in Australia especially, uh, there's a real lack of political engagement, um, from our community. Are you able to expand on why you think that is and what, what do we do about that? And sort of whoever would like to pick that up to start off with.

### John Arkan

Thank you very much. And um, hello afternoon to you all. Um, firstly, can I just acknowledge the traditional custodians of this country where we're meeting and pass my respects to the elders past and present and I, as a counselor, you need to say those things. And as a Sikh, I think that's very important that we have a recognition and an understanding that there are people before us and the people of this nation had been here for a very long time. And it's very important to acknowledge that. And in saying that, I'd like to say good day to my fellow panellists and all of the people out here in the in thing in our gathering the question was, um, how do we get involved? Um, I can only speak from, from uh, what, what I believe and, how, what my journey was and if I can possibly just touch on that a little bit, uh, because I think that'll give us an interesting perspective on how we do that. Um, so you've probably guessed with my wonderful accent, I'm an Australian born Sikh, um, and doesn't necessarily have to have that brand of Sikh there. I think we need to move along with that as well. Just as a community, understand it. It's our belief system and that's wonderful. But think about the common shared values as human beings on this earth and try to propagate those. I think that's really important. My grandfather came here to Australia in 1880. So we've got a long history with this country and possibly just to reflect on those numbers. That's a lot of years to get a counselor level person into politics. So we've got a bit of work to do people. However, with what I've noticed here today, I think we are on the ball. I think we are so on the ball. It's ridiculous. We've got counselors, MPs, state, federal, all here and I must commend the, [03:39 Inaudible] I'm a little bit disappointed all the red turbans are not here, but uh, that, uh, when we started the youth camps and whatnot, I think we've come a long way. There's so many kids here that were about that big and better looking now I might say as well, um, from when they were little. But that happens. But it's important that we are here the way we are. And I think it's all about participation in a, my grandfather was a Sikh turban, bearded person at that time and we have

this unbelievable thought in our minds that we can't achieve anything without [04:13 Inaudible] our values, I think we need to think about that. And I think in my life it's been one hell of a wonderful thing that I am the way that I am. I think people respect who you are and how you are, and then they will vote for you if we're pretending to be something else, people won't vote for you because people are very clever. Remember the people put you there. And that's where that word saver comes into. Um, you know, as soon as we start thinking, oh, we're part of the government where a counselor, where a MP, I think you lost the plot. You have to remember always cause Babananik said. And if you think about his history and we think about that role model of our Gurujis, if we just follow that he didn't stay in a good [04:58 Inaudible] or one spot, he grabbed a mate of his that played a wonderful instrument who happened to be a Muslim and went out and sat out outside of what was a tradition. So don't be afraid. I think we are built with Gargi Gullah, we are built us of me, we have all of the things that it takes. If we acknowledge that and that's also a thing that we need to do, I better hurry up, you're looking at me really strange like, but in particular I do like to mention that background. So 1880 till now I've been elected to council, this is my third term as an elected representative. I have ambitions to be with your assistance to go further with that and I think we have to work together on that. I remember on my second term as elections really hard to get people to man the booths where you are and somebody found out, and I must say the Indian concept of parliament or elections is way different to hear somebody found out and phoned Brisbane and these three cars turned up at six o'clock in the morning with 15-20 boys and ladies and girls [06:02 inaudible] And so that was huge. So there's a, there's a resource here, so let's stick together on that. And whoever or one of us or whoever wants to aspire to be a politician, there's a young guy that was sitting at the front, that young man there, he's telling me he wants to be a counselor. So that's really good. He speaks wonderfully so that you've got a whole pile of people here that will run with you and help you out. It's really important to have the support of people just in regards to we'll google, if I quickly reflect their, we'll Google the home of the first Sikh temple in Australia in 1968 and think about the timeline there as well. 1880, 1968 it takes a long time to do things. However, with the Sikhs there, there's 74,000 people in our electorate Sikhs probably only 4,000 but just think about these figures. The Sikhs own 95% of the farming land. The Sikhs contribute one, at this particular point in time, more than a billion dollars at their farm gate in the farm industry. So what I'm getting at, we're not, we're not blowings or fresh off the boat or all those other terms. We are an integral part of this nation and it's very important that we then become part of parliament. It's not something that might happen. It's we've got to make it happen and it'll happen easily because we've got all the goods. If you think about marketing, there's a couple of girls here that are really well spoken, it is all about marketing. The Gurujis good have given us so much. We stick out like you know, we're not here, we don't, but if you walk around with the guys that are, the Gurujis are very clever than the Shans obvious here. You know, we walk around when I walk into the local government, when I walk into state parliament and whatnot, people turn around and that's it, it's all about that attraction and if you've got some goods to give them, which we have remembered the common values of humanity, it's a little touchy. My wife said not to speak about this. We've got to move away a little bit with the word Sikh and I don't mean put it away, it's very important. However, we just need to be good humans and again, reflect on Bob Mononoke. Bob Mononoke didn't push committees and dress up in a particular way or anything like that and Bob Mononoke was all about humanity and if you take in humanity to the councils or to wherever you're heading, you can't go wrong. There is no wrongness there. You try your best and I've got some wonderful people that are going to speak if I ever give them the microphone. Alrighty, geez politicians love to be in charge. Look just the very, very quickly, then I'm finished that we grew up in war Gaga. I'm a family of six. My father died when I was three and this is really important as

well. I would, I have a passion to have female, the lady, the gender in local governments and state and federal. We are lacking in the world picture not, not just the Indians. The Aussies are lacking, we are still fiddling and I want to say that other word. We are mucking around trying to work out whether a female has any ability at all. Apparently you have to dress a particular way to be in parliament. What a ridiculous thought and Bob Mononoke said, you all know that took care about how wonderful our women are. And I say our as in part of creation, not ours in position. We need to move away and let the women run if they want to run and that will in this particular part of history in the world, it's the time fellows to step back, let the girls come forward, let the ladies do what they want to do. So have a think about that because I have a passion and a wish. I want to see our Sikh girls. I've spoken to a few people here, lady you speak magnificent. You should run for council. I forgot your name. If you can speak like that and the way you look and the way you present yourself run for council because if you're getting to council then you put your hand up for the next one and you keep going. So Dad died when I was three. We all grew up there. We're all locals. We all been there and Sikhs only 4, 5,000 out of 70 whatever it was. I'd been elected looking like this three times. I was deputy mayor the second election, I actually won the election for the mayor, but on the preference system I lost by 102 I learned about doing preferences really quickly and I'm happy to help anybody here. There's a system, you've got to learn how to play the system. That's just cleverness. There was a gentleman early in the part a, I think it was on the first panel who said Sikhs make smart decisions. That's very true, but we also take opportunities, so if you see an opportunity, don't go [10:39 inaudible] Babanani didn't [10:42 Inaudible] I'll just wait for a little while, then I'll go and sit out. Then I'll choose for the unknown that that didn't happen. But Martha Mother Yeti, the Horny horny year, it happens. So don't, don't worry about that. Sorry if I spoke Punjabi, but let it, let it happen. Go with the flow. Keep trying, don't stop, and we'll put this Mike over here.

[Applause]

### **Kanwaljit Singh Bakshi**

[Inaudible] and I would like to acknowledge John and Injerdit Singh as my panellist and Sofia from New Zealand who is the moderator for this session. Uh, one thing I would like to clarify that once you give a microphone to a politician, it's very hard to take away. So that's what has happened. So I'll keep it brief, but definitely it is a time for have uh, what John said that uh, move away from Sikh word. I agree and disagree. I agree that uh, you have to represent the wider community. You just can't represent the Sikhs in any, any level of government. But definitely as Injerdit the said that we are minority of the minorities but we stand outstandingly. We stand out that we are the leaders. Wherever you see in the world, most of the places we will find the Sikhs are the first one to be elected as a representative, whether it is Singapore, whether it is New Zealand, whether it is Canada, America, you have seen so many Sikhs in the front line and the challenges, we have seen that from time to time that how we are going to project ourselves. That is one thing we have to understand. And today I met a couple of people who are very keen on getting into the politics. My suggestion to them is that first of all, getting into parliament, you need a platform and that is a political party. Join a major political party. That's my view. I know John doesn't agree to that, but my view is that to get into parliament, you can't do it independently right now, you need to have a platform whether is liberal or labour, but before going to any political party, make sure that party aligns to your beliefs. If you don't align together, you won't achieve anything. So if you are a firm believer that liberal is the right party for you, go for liberals. If you believe that Labour party is the right party, go for the Labour Party and I would love to see soon a

representation of our people in parliament. That's what I have been doing for last seven or eight years. I have come many times to Australia to encourage that we should get into parliament over here. It is the right time. We have got the numbers, we have the right cause why we want to be in parliament. Is a, I don't know when the first Indian arrived in Australia, but it was 1890 when the first Sikh arrived from Australia to New Zealand. Two brothers came in, a foreman Singh Gill was the one who arrived in, uh, New Zealand in 1890 from 1890 till I came in 2001. There was no representation of any Indian or any Sikh. We were there for last 120 years, but nobody was representing truly us in the parliament. And I joined a political party and started lobbying that we should have a representation in parliament and we could not find a candidate. It took a while before I put up my hand because I was offered that position a couple of times that why don't you get into parliament as the representative. And I totally agreed that, uh, you need to understand what is the requirement and how the culture works. But it took me eight years before I put up my hand because I wanted to build that foundation for myself and the community and that's how I got into parliament. I think there are a number of issues which I'll be talking about later at the dinner and I just don't want to repeat the same things, but I want to keep some of those things for that time. I would like to pass upon to Injerdit Singh.

### **Inderjit Singh**

Thank you, really interesting to hear that perspective. I have a bit of a different slant to it or how we can surf and you know, get into politics because middle in Singapore, I mentioned earlier that I did not ask, I did not put up my hand and, but I was asked to, to join and why was I asked and why was Harvinda asked, why is everyone else asked now in our ruling parties? Because I think, no, I would encourage each one of you to excel in what you do. Stand up, be with the best in your career. You, you'll be the best lawyer that you are. Be The best entrepreneur and be the best in whatever you do. And once you can be very successful in your career, you know, and uh, I think, you know, that's one thing that will make it easier for you to be spotted even when you decide to put up your hand. Uh, so the other thing is of course you know, you must have the capacity and the ability, but you also must have the desire and that's why putting up a hand comes in that, you know, you must serve, go in with a spirit of wanting to serve and, and, and don't, don't be shy. I think three we hear, we heard from many people including other respected politicians here in Australia and New Zealand is that, you know, that uh, was 19, 18 fifth, uh, in the 18 hundreds till now it was no different in Singapore. Our first Sikh, they arrive in Singapore in 1850 something and the first Sikh MP in Singapore was in 1991 when Harvinda came in. So it will be also, we took that much of time. I think we spent a lot of time, uh, in worrying about whether we are going to be accepted or whether I think now we have enough examples around the world to show that we can do it. So therefore you also must have the desire to come and come forward and do what you can to serve our community and serve society at large. So you have the capacity. Please come forward and show the desire and I think, you know, you'll do a good job.

### **Sofia Kaur**

Okay, great. Thank you. I'm just conscious of time and I'd really like to give the audience an opportunity to engage directly with you in question and answer. Um, so if our wonderful, um, mike holders could, could go around, are there any questions from the audience around, um, how we sort of take our migration out, business entrepreneurship and to our political future?

### **Audience member**

I'm just coming from a male perspective here. Um, a lot of people from India or backgrounds from India, Sikh boys come here, they cut their hair and Turban uh, they get rid of it. Um, what are the Australian government doing to recognize the turban in the wider community? Uh, especially in schools. Um, and what have they done in New Zealand in your tenure and in Singapore as well. So cause I know Singapore is quite advanced in multiculturalism. Um, but when I was growing up, I saw a lot of, you know, um, pushback from even my PE teachers, you know, they used to say, oh, we've got a swimming carnival. Um, how are you going to tie your hair? You know, what, what are you going to do? Um, so is there any kind of, um, things or, um, areas that you think, you know, uh, advancing in Australia? Uh, compared to the, like the Singaporeans?

### **John Arkan**

I'm happy to answer that again, from what I'm saying. I grew up like this, put my hand up and walked into council. Um, I think it's a mindset even though, uh, there are many atrocities in the world we're not the only Punjabis or the only group of human beings that have atrocities or hardships. What, what, uh, I'm speaking of in regards to moving away from that Sikh thing, concept is not, we're never going to move away from that cause we're Sikhs, however, it's in Australian's, political history, in Australians history in the world, we are entering a new era and I respectfully acknowledge of course there's going to be parties there are not talking about that at all. I'm talking about being so unique and so understanding what the people are looking for. For example, what's happening with the banks and, and energy and all the rest of the things that are going on in Australia now in the world. That trust concept is leaving. So really I think this display gives you a unique marketing tool. It gives you a history of fighting and for values that are common to human beings. I think how many Victoria crosses have been earned and anywhere in the world Sikhs wherever they participate with or without. I particularly don't need to focus. I mean, if you can keep your guests, this is also a part of God's wish. If you like that, don't use that as a, uh, look at me and you know, I've been battled and there's a word bullying earlier here. You know, all of those things happen. We need to acknowledge them, but our mission has to be bigger than that. And guess what our mission is, it's not what we're going to say, but [20:42 Inaudible] mission was [20:43 Inaudible] That's where we're heading, we're not heading into parties, not heading into segregation. You know, when the history in, in federation in 1900 this is white Australian policy, you know all about that sort of stuff. Just think when, that was just the other day and we had one brief quote here and some other people talking about the history of the elderly people that were here in early [21:03 Inaudible] think about what they were doing in the hardships that they went onto. We've, we get off the plane nowadays, we've got a Goldwater to go to. We have a job to go to. What are our hardships? You know, we haven't got any hardships. What we need to do is not focus. There was a child in Melbourne that was focusing about bullying in a Catholic school. If you use those English words, and I'm not very good at them, but my God, what were you doing in that Catholic school? That's, that's a really strange philosophy that only children that go in a Catholic private school are going to be smart. This is Australia. We're speaking about. We're going to build the nation because our, our concept is [21:40 Inaudible] We need to move. So what I'm getting at is don't focus too much on our shortcomings. We've got lots of them and I think there's a beautiful, there's a, there's a line in our scriptures that speak, don't worry about your shortcomings. We're not perfect. However, keep going because we're looking for the father of all. And I hope that answers your question.

### **Kanwaljit Singh Bakshi**

I think there is a not much, uh, of that concern in New Zealand. Uh, the turbans are accepted in the schools. And uh, initially when I came in 2001, they were a little bit of a resistance for Kara only. So the PE teachers normally used to object that somebody might get hurt because of this, uh, Kara. And uh, then later on we went to the schools. We explained how the things are, why it is important for us. And eventually now it is more or less acceptable in all the schools that the Sikhs children will wear a Kara, it's not only the Sikh, but a lot of Hindu children also do wear a Kara. So that's more or less acceptable and one thing we need to keep it in mind that Guru Sahib gave us this identity and we have to be proud of it. Wherever we stand, we should be proud of our heritage, of our religion and of our language, these things are, three things I feel are very important and from my own perspective, uh, when Dr Manmohon Singh became the Prime Minister of India, that was a big boost for us. A lot of people after 911, there are so many challenges. I myself felt at some places where people try to identify me as a Muslim, but that was the time and that's how things were, but ever since Dr Manmohon Singh became the prime minister, we got a big boost and a lot of people came aware of this thing. And when I went to the New Zealand Parliament, again same thing happened in New Zealand. People became more aware of the Sikhism. When I gave my first made in speech in the parliament, I recited a Shabbat from Guru Granth Sahib of uh, Guru [24:01 Inaudible] which explained how he wanted to see the town, how it should be, and I said that in my speech that that's how I would like to see New Zealand as well. So the awareness with my presence in parliament with a turban makes lot of difference. Lots of people have become aware of it. Talking about South Island, a lot of people, the farming community over there, they had never seen a Sikh man, like a Sikh man how they look like. And I remember going to some of the meetings of the party in South Island. People used to ask me about the religion and it used to take some time to explain what it is. So I think we are proud of it. And we should be proud of it and we should remain proud of it.

### Inderjit Singh

Just, two things to add to this is that uh, first is, um, in Singapore you asked, we are very fortunate that uh, the government understand sympathizes with us, but it's not been an easy, uh, thing for us to keep. Uh, after September 11 and after some of the Muslims got more conservative in Singapore, they wanted their daughters to stop wearing the [25:11 Inaudible] to schools. And so the Muslim community pointed to the Sikh, if you allow the sick boys to wear a turban, why don't you allow us to do it? And uh, now we want to say that these are religion and so therefore we should be allowed. The Muslim will say is also my religion and therefore I should be allowed, my girls should be allowed to wear. So that was not an argument that government hang on to. We have to than one person for helping us to still be able to keep our turban, ride our motorcycles with the turban without helmet is Winston Churchill in the parliament speech, he fought to allow Sikhs, British Sikhs to keep the turban while they're riding the motorcycle. So the government in Singapore until today points to the British tradition that we don't want to change and therefore we allow the Sikhs and the British did not allow it too long. And so what I'm saying is not easy balance for us to keep even in Singapore. I mentioned about the care plan issues just now also, you know as we go ahead, people forget and don't. If they don't know who you are, they will not understand your practices and then you can get into, into trouble. So therefore the second point is that don't wait for you to have an MP in parliament or, a minister in parliament to do it. The community leaders, all of us as community leaders, we need to spend a lot of time engaging the political leaders, the government officials to tell them who we are, and in Singapore, the community leaders have taken various opportunities. In 1999 during the 300 anniversary of the Khalsa, we all got together and we organized it in a very grand manner. 18 events in one year. We invited the prime

minister, the president, the speaker of parliament and ministers and so on. The idea was not just to make us feel good, is to show who we are, the rest of the communities this year find them 50th anniversary of, of, of, of Guru Nanak Dev ji's birthday, we have also former national committee among the Sikh community leaders. And we want to do the same. We want to invest time projecting ourselves. So as community leaders, don't wait for our politician. We also must invest in this kind of time and effort so that, you know, the government recognizes who we are and Punjabi recognition, I mentioned the community leaders in Singapore did it first. I did not do it. I got full recognition for them. But the community leaders in, uh, did it with, uh, without a MP in parliament. So we still can do many things even before you have an MP.

### **John Arkan**

So can I just add a little bit of a good way in Australia to do, um, get involved is, and I'm not sure in our township we've been there that long, there have never been any Sikhs on the chambers of commerce. Uh, I'd urge you all, whoever is able, young people get involved in the chambers of commerce. It's not like Indian politics where you, you know, go for a particular group or they, they put you in, you've got to be involved in, in that grassroots level. So Chambers of commerce as a counselor, when we, when we're doing something in our community, the first person or the first group we write to was the chambers of commerce. And then they have a say, we don't know. We don't need to go there as Sikhs, we need to go there as important business people that might have a business and want to be, help to the chambers of commerce. The other things that we need to do and are already happening. We need to be involved in rotary. Again, there was rotary lions, surfs clubs, anything like that, get involved like that so that people are not trying to be, we don't need to go and tell somebody who we are. They can see, they'll go though. There's the guys that are pushing that surfboard. A lot of that's the fellows that were doing the rotary club and then it just becomes a natural, and we've been here we've got the history, we've got the knowledge, we've even got the good looks, but it all works.

### **Sofia Kaur**

Um, can I just ask for closing remarks, um, from, from each of you around politics and Server, so, so how do you incorporate Server into your vision of politics and, and just your closing remarks around that as we move into the next session.

### **John Arkan**

Yeah, that's a, that's a really big question because sya is really important. No let her cry. Um, there is, if you're going to put your hand up for government, don't go there thinking that I am an MP or whatever. You lost the plot. You have to go there with I'm going to do server and the server could be attending high schools and speaking as a counselor and talking about turbans. It could be a number of items there. Sya makes it work if you go there. Otherwise, you know that battle that we all speak about. It's not the battle out there in the field. It's the battle with the ego and all the other bits and pieces. You all understand that and we've got the tools for that. [29:39 Inaudible] helps you in that little battle that we're having in and it doesn't matter what you look like, you play that battle on a personal, on a personal level, and you present yourself as a human being, fighting for the values of a better country, a better town, a better school, not segregated or hate the word multicultural. Sorry, I shouldn't say that. I don't hide it, but I do. We need to go there as Australians and we need to go there and be good human beings. If we do that and server means that not just in the Goldwater, that, that that's a good place to learn how to do it and then go and do it somewhere else.

**Kanwaljit Singh Bakshi**

I think I totally agree with John that uh, once you are involved at any level, whether it is counsel level or federal level, you are there for the Sya and sometimes you server can be behind the scene. How you see how the challenges come in. I'll give you an example that a about a year ago there, uh, there was a immigration case. This lady came to me who has been overstated for 29 years in New Zealand and she had tried everything, whatever the uh, lawyers could suggest her. And she spent lots of money to get her status reinstated as a legal person in New Zealand. And for 29 years she had never visited back home to her parents or anyone. And the, in these 29 years, she became the great grandmother also. So she was there all the time trying to get that status where she could become a legal person in New Zealand, and she came to me with the grace of God. I talked to the minister and he agreed to give her the status, what she was asking for and I think that was the night I really felt that I have done something good and that is the saver. That is the opportunity. You can only avail with the position you have. You can only go to the ministers if you have got the access. One thing very good about uh, politicians in Australia, New Zealand, they are very approachable. You can go and talk to them. It's not like India where there is, there are so many barriers before you can go and see them. But over here you can approach your politician at any level. Whenever you see them you can talk to them directly. And that's what I feel that we are very lucky to be politicians in Australia and New Zealand, where we can really do the good saver and that is where the satisfaction comes in and that Gurbani teaches us from time, time. If you correlate everything, you will find an answer in the Gurbani, the what we should be doing, when we become a member of parliament or a counselor. People don't care over here who you are, they just want to see a normal person. We have seen so many times that our ministers are walking on the streets meeting the people where is, If it comes to your head or for example the cricket players or rugby players over here, they are approachable and the players who come from India, it's hardly, you can approach them. Sorry to say that, but they are people from our home country, from our country, but they are not approachable. We are as we are very approachable and we can do the saver, real saver can be done once you are there, whether you are in counselor parliament, you can definitely do it. And I'm very proud that I have helped so many people that uh, they are today legal or whatever the reason they came to see me, I have been able to help them.

**Inderjit Singh**

Yeah. I, I, in my speech, I talked about, I saw politics as a saver as a public service. So, and I give some example, but you don't in parliament, uh, as an MP in Singapore, uh, maybe only 20% of my work is in parliament. 80% is behind the scenes. We spend our time in our constancy, every weekend, fully every, uh, weekday, most of the weekday nights and then we to in committees. And so there's a lot of hard work away from the family sacrificing a bit of your career also. And uh, and so, so that's so much a hard work. Uh, every week we have a meet the people session where my residents are free to come and see me as an MP. And I see about 50 or 60 of them started about 7:00 PM I finished about 1:00 AM and I'll go back home next day. I have to go back to work. So my point is, there's so much hard work involved in doing this saver, It is because of saver, I could do it. If I had seen it as an ego thing that I'm an MP and I, you know, people are coming to me. I don't think so. I would have lost that 20 years. I did four times as an MP, 20 years and a, and that's actually quite long of hard work. So if it's, if you see the saver, all this hard work will you help people achieve what, they solved your problems, then you know, you're satisfying, but you can pull through because it's saver.

**Sofia Kaur**

Thank you very much. I'm, I'm looking forward to continuing these conversations outside of the networking. Um, but what that we're going to set up this panel. Thank you very much for, for your insight today.