

REFLECTIONS AS A SIKH POLITICIAN (INDERJIT SINGH)

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Inderjit Singh

Thank you. Good afternoon everyone and thank you YSPN for inviting me here today I almost missed the event because I started lecturing at the university at a lecture today I managed to postpone by about a week so I'm very happy to be here and so far the quality of the discussions in the morning and this afternoon has been excellent and a congratulation YSPN is really a great job and you know I think sets a very high standard for anyone else who wants to organize and even like that you know I learned a lot. So my section is on politics and you know so the question is how do you link the Sikh values politics can you do that you know when I first got elected in 1996 my first conference I attended here and I was talking about it at lunchtime was in Victoria and in the Parliament in Victoria and the discussion by the MPs local MPs here was about among all the professions how politicians are ranked last and I was discussing in my colleague from New Zealand just now and he was saying that politicians are just one rank above poor prostitutes in his written so the Speaker of the Victorian Parliament saw me sitting with a turban and it's ah you know we have a friend from Singapore here and I was not scheduled to speak actually and so you know he said can you how is it in Singapore so I'd have to miss my lunch because you don't have to prepare my speech and and I started by telling him that among professions politicians are ranked number one in Singapore and I think you know it know the reasons why, so I hope you know and I will try to explain to you how my Sikh values helped me in this area too. Now we are minority of minorities anywhere in the world that we go. In India we are minority of a minority, in Singapore we are minority, Indians are minority and even minority in the Indian community. In Australia you feel that same way so via minority of minorities how have you done so far throughout this many years and I think the good news is that if we look around the world, including here in Australia. I think the answer is that despite us being a minority of minorities the Sikh community has done very well everywhere that we have been and I think if you start with the best example Dr. Manmohan Singh Prime Minister of India and Dr Narinder Singh Kapany, inventor of the fiber optics one of entrep, very successful entrepreneurs. Narinder Singh who was my parliamentary colleague when I was in Parliament, best lawyer in Southeast Asia and we've got Rupee core one of the best-selling authors of her books, Sanadam core who is going to perform at the Grammys this year what is alia and many more in politics we heard this morning that in Canada we've got four Sikhs in cabinet I mean that is great achievement even India could not have fun and that's where we should have fall right but no and we have got a turban MP in New Zealand in Singapore at one time there were three of us; Narinder who's a lawyer, myself and both of us were elected and there was another lady Canogit Soign, she's a surgeon and she was a nominated MP and and today there is still one more member of parliament in Singapore and that is a Habitha Singh and he is from the opposition of ruling

party but he's a leader of the main opposition party in Singapore and he's still in Parliament and we wish him well although you know I'm gonna campaign for my party but you know I wish him well. So you know when when I was actually you know I explained my a bit of my experience when I was being put up as a potential candidate for the 1996 election in Singapore, Narinder was already in Parliament and we were attending a deepali function then the Indian Muslim community cornered our prime minister Goh chok Tong I was with him going around and they say Prime Minister we don't have an Indian Muslim in Parliament can you put Indian Muslim in there that was before the elections announced and the prime minister told them no no no we don't choose people by representation, you see if you do that we only need half a Sikh in Parliament and but I'm gonna have two and we choose them based on their capability they're only twelve thousand Sikhs in Singapore, not like the fifty thousand like what you have down here, it's a very small community but I think you know in Singapore over the years not just politicians but we have got many very successful leaders in various fields whether they were in the military or whether they were in the police force in the professions you know and so on to you know we able to succeed despite being such a small community and and why it was that possible so maybe a bit of my background and I'll try to link back to you know how you know as a Sikh personal practice Sikhy, you know a I manage to do politics without having to compromise what my value system. I did 20 years, I did four terms I almost got into the fifth um but I refused and because I think I had done my my service and I explained what I mean by that in a while but you know my voter base was 80% Chinese you know why I did not get voted in a place where I had major Sikhs, most of my voters were Chinese. I maybe had point something percent Sikhs and I had Indian's and Malays, but you know I managed to get their trust and their support and win four elections and I continue to serve and I was actually serving together with our prime minister I was in the same team as a prime minister in a prime minister in Ang Mo Kio GRC. Now the core message I want to deliver to our young who are sitting down here is that each one of us who has the capacity and each one of us who's got the capability we need to be more engaged in the society that we live in no matter where in which part of the world we are, not just serve your own community but serve the society at large and I think that is a universal value that we learn from Guru Nanak and all our gurus that you know we should carry to any community that we go and, and this is how we must be viewed not just among ourselves but the rest of people in the society in, in my case in singapore we are multi racial majority seventy five percent are chinese and other races we are very small but you know they still have seen us as very valuable citizens who are able to contribute and continue to look out for us to support them.

So the question is you know can Sikhs a distinct community that practices you know our core values very different and we had many examples of even though how different we look they have succeeded in their careers in entrepreneurship in the professions and so on so can we can we practice Sikhi? Can our values be translated into, into politics and and then yet for us to be successful and you know most importantly for us is a being so small around the world about maybe thirty million of us and it's such a small is that you know how can we do our part individually to to get the respect of everyone else so that we can practice our religion and we can practice our practices and our children will have a great future it becomes our responsibility to project that kind of image so that the next generations will also have an easier time than our previous generation who were very tough time integrating into the places that that we get into. Now so let me share the five areas of politics of the key and then relate them to politics and how I practice them in Singapore because let's say I have lacks experience and I looked at politics in Singapore as a national service rather than as a career and before I entered into politics I actually was already a student leader, I was a community leader I had served my community as a

volunteer and all my residents in my area and and so when the opportunity to get into Parliament came about which was not something that I asked for by the way I was asked to come into politics and I saw it as an opportunity to do a lot more than what I could do as a community leader that if I entered Parliament I could do a lot more for Singaporeans I could do a lot more for the Sikh community and so when I was invited I took it as an opportunity to do a national service at a wider and a bigger level and so I chose it so let me relate to the five; first courage, [09:43 Inaudible] second the spirit of [09:47 Inaudible] a positive attitude never say die and we heard just now we always we are gonna face problem always and therefore I personally believe and I'm an entrepreneur more than I'm a politician actually is that there's no problem that cannot be solved every problem that we face in life can be solved just that you know the solutions may not be what you thought you know but just good soft bomb savour seven leader we heard about that today and therefore politics is a natural extension of Silva another form of say we are not just doing good water a public service duty all of us have a duty to represent the community in policymaking and finally project the community as a responsible citizen of the country so six as responsible citizens of Singapore of Australia even as my fellow panellists or share with you standing for election is not an easy task I had to convince 80% of Chinese who did not know me before I enter into politics to work for me that requires a lot of courage and and in also enter into Parliament first you have to win the elections to win the elections you really have to promise a lot of things and when you promise this thing you have to deliver you must have the confidence and the courage to announce and to end what you want to do and then later on to work hard to go and deliver those things that you want to do and then of course these days is a lot more tougher than when I started social media there's going to be a lot of fake news whatever you say or do people will amplify make it sound very bad and therefore it will discourage you you must have back attic should go beyond what you read on the social media believe in yourself and that will help you succeed so this first survival exactly know that I am willing to fight any big battle and I'm confident to win so that's courage second part about courage is when I enter Parliament was my willingness to stand up and fight for the issues that I believed in now I came from from the ruling party the ruling party had always had an absolute majority in fact for me for our first 30 years it was 100 percent seats were ruling party via no opposition seats at all by the time I came into Parliament there were two elected single seat of opposition members and then the rest of us were you know elected from the ruling party set but so therefore opposition could not do an effective job me representing the people so I played the role of an opposition and I was viewed as a tougher opposition than the real opposition in Parliament so which means I had to stand up and fight and on many issues that I believe in the end and that brings me to the second value and that is a spirit of Caracalla that no problem there's no problem that cannot be solved so many a times I stood up and I battled many of the heavyweight ministers and also Prime Minister who was my colleague because I'm on the same team as him but also he was a prime minister and and and and I fought them on many issues that I I believed in for example we had a system of early streaming in primary schools at the age of nine they start streaming children into different streams according to how did i in the examination in primary that determine the rest of your life you know whether they go to a slower stream or faster stream but we know children develop at different phases so I spend almost about 15 years battling the government on this and every time when I battle administers I of course got bruised I know they used to ridicule me and and did a lot of thing but that I did not give up the spirit of Tecla some years later they change and they finally have to change so don't give up second example was on the economic growth policy of Singapore I had devised a term that's called growth at all costs policy in Singapore which I thought was very damaging because the government was just growing the economy leaving people behind I believed in an inclusive growth

strategy similarly when I talked about isn't the reply from the finance minister first a prime minister and then someone who was the next finance minister was there's no such thing we can control growth has to grow on their own after 2011 election when they got a bit and quite badly in elections they came back in the next budget speech say yes from now onwards we're gonna focus on inclusive growth economic strategy so it took me about 10 over years to fight this battle never give up to decline the third value saver sovereign leader and and and therefore politics is a natural extension of policy now why is why as we organize in this conference this is so server to the youth and the Sikhs in Australia and we heard this morning many times sever is not just doing the same and Katara's we can serve the community in many ways and our gurus taught us not to just serve the community but society humanity at large so each one of us should contribute in whichever way we can as I mentioned before I started as politics I was serving is a community leader and then in 96 I got into into Parliament and I and I saw it as an opportunity to serve our community at a wider level and and and do a lot more things that I believed I didn't need it to be done for our citizens so what I don't it did for Sikh community at that time was which that brings me to the fourth is duty is dead Punjabi if you see what's happening in Singapore today is recognized as an official mother tongue language when I was growing up I was forced to learn either Chinese Tamil normally we have to learn English is our main language and we have to learn a mother tongue but the government never recognized these for many years about 20 years ago our community leaders managed to get some recognition but no funding from government and so the government actually you know still did not fully believe in it so this is one thing that I spend a lot of time again battling inside and outside Parliament finally in 2007 we got the approval to be fully recognized and to be fully funded by the government so this is not duty I thought you know I have to do now we grapple with and therefore you know that if you have the capacity and capability please come forward and do this and you can achieve some of these things after September 11 our Sikh community faced big problems because of how we look and one of the big issues that appeared in Singapore was caring of kirpan who are caring around our police officers stopped people who were caring good one and so because people did not understand what it means for us so because of I I was there I managed to organize a meeting of our community leaders all the security agencies in Singapore and we got approval from the government to carry based based on some specification and finally you know we have 70 Edoras in Singapore we actually for 12,000 Singaporean that's six there's too many but but I'm image to better the government to get one more piece of land in the western part of Singapore that is currently lacking but we had something else in mind as community leaders I spend a lot of time that are completely is that we want to do more things and Jessica Dora we need to build a city hub welfare there 100 all folks that are living in different all folks from Singapore some in the Muslim all folk from some in the Christian all folks home and some in the Buddhist all folks on if we can create one like that in a place where yourself at the Torah VM longer you know we can do a lot youth camps you know yes new top spot servants of you the good news is the government is gonna allocate as this line very soon it is bigger than any piece of land that companies currently owns in Singapore so we will start that project very soon Mel and I are working on this project we will take us a few years but we're gonna build there so I think you know these are examples of what we can do you know as a duty to come forward in any level of policymaking that you can because if we did if I was not there after that winter was not there the government would not know who we are twelve thousand I hear many times even the Indian communities for ten percent the politicians I'll tell you it the Indian word is not important to us so why would they care and they will not be bothered to get into the depth of our issues so it's really up to us to surface some of these things you really want to solve those problems and that we've let me face and then those things that we want to do and finally my fifth you know value is projecting six and

the Sikh community as a responsible citizen we ever believed so while I took the opportunity to help our community to do many things that I could you know I wish I could do more but you know I would say bah is what is predetermined so I did what I could but I think I also wanted to do more for the Singapore society at large positively contribute to nation-building improving the life of Singaporeans in general improving the lives of my residents and my waters and I was concerned of fact that Singaporeans will judge me not just as me in the gym but as a Sikh that there was a Sikh Parliament or c-diddy ways this time did he just do things that were not significant he was a sense of duty for me that I had to project myself as a responsible citizen not for me you know I am my time is past but for the future so that people continue to respect the Sikh community and our future generation so that our future generation would get the kind of opportunities that I couldn't could get so that was my mindset that I went on that I wanted to build on a good reputation and the six early had I was given a opportunity in a position where I could continue to project this and maybe strengthen the image that I could create for our community so there were many things that I did in other than this what I did for the community was you mentioned you had just now in the entrepreneurship promotion in Parliament I spent a lot of time focusing on policies that could help entrepreneurs could help small and medium enterprises and could help you know improve the whole economic well-being of Singaporeans so that you know everyone can have a better life in 2013 we had a very contentious white paper in Parliament he was called a population white paper we were suffering because you know that we already had many foreigners in Singapore but infrastructure was not built there were no hospital bits not enough not enough Hospital bit not enough transportation or enough houses and the government was pushing a paper that was going to make it worse so I stood up and I challenged the government and I walked out of Parliament did not work for if I had stayed I had to work for the party because of is not if that if you know what the parliamentary process is so I just fought the government and believe me but I think you know I got a scolding from my Prime Minister but I told him you I say you'll thank me one day because I did what was right and you know that and that day a piece in your party who's willing who are willing to do what is right so both lavender and myself my colleague who was in Parliament before me and I'm currently Pritam Singh who's of opposition party have also similarly contribute in the manner where today we have strengthened the reputation of the Sikh community of signatures of Sikh professionals in Singapore and so we saw it as an opportunity for us to to you know continue to build on that and so that our future generations will benefit so in conclusion and say that if done correctly take away all the corruption take away all the negative things that you see in politics and many power levels politics is a natural contribution for our six and our value system allows to serve society with the courage a winning spirit that can help improve the community and also be seen as a responsible citizen for the whole country for society at large and that is a reason why Lee Kuan Yew chose to Sikhs to be in Parliament at the same time when you only needed half and we have to thank our leaders for giving us that opportunity and and I think I hope we see a Sikh parliamentarian here in Australia we in New Zealand we have many in Canada but I think without being actively involved in politics at all levels whether it's a glass at a glass of level whether at a government you know civil service level or whether in Parliament or as a minister in the future we may not be able to achieve all the things have you energy for our communities or encourage our youth to aspire to that levels and with the 30 class spirit there's no problem that cannot be solved perseverance you'll make it thank you for attention.

[Applause]