

Immigration a hot issue in ethnically diverse Surrey; Unscrupulous immigration consultants on voters'minds

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Body

'He was offering me tea,' explains Harjit Singh Gill after an unusually long stop at the doorstep of a potential supporter.

The NDP candidate is translating a conversation that happened entirely in Punjabi, the unofficial language in this riding of Surrey-Newton. In this particular stretch of suburb on the outer edges of B.C.'s Lower Mainland, most residents prefer Singh Gill's Punjabi campaign material to the English version.

More than 60 per cent of residents in Surrey-Newton are of South Asian descent, most of them Indian; a host of other Filipinos, Latin Americans and Chinese make it among the most ethnically diverse ridings in the country.

That patchwork of nationalities has fed into the local politics of a region that represents one of the key battlegrounds in next week's election. Vancouver and the Lower Mainland will be crucial in deciding whether Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau can hang onto his majority government, a region surpassed in significance only by Quebec and the Greater Toronto Area.

The Conservatives and NDP have put forward viable candidates in the riding - both of them former radio hosts - in an effort to unseat the Liberal incumbent Sukh Dhaliwal, who has represented the region for two stretches since 2006.

Dhaliwal won a commanding victory in 2015, claiming 13,000 more votes than his NDP rival, or almost a third of the total ballots cast. But NDP strategists claim Liberal fatigue could help Singh Gill turn the region orange again. Conservatives also see an avenue for their candidate, Harpreet Singh, amid rising anxieties over surging crime rates and **immigration** (Singh came third in the riding in 2015).

Voters in Surrey-Newton are focused on much the same issues as other ridings in the area, with housing affordability and the environment among the list of concerns. But frustration over a recent influx of immigrant workers in the area, exacerbated in part by shady consultants who charge a fee to recruit new labourers, has begun to dominate discussions on the sidelines of sporting events and at family gatherings.

New consultancy firms, many unauthorized, have sprung up so rapidly that the **immigration** industry is now among the most prominent in the city, after real estate and accounting.

"If you go four blocks down, there's about 200 consultants in that complex," says Neera Agnihotri, owner of Agnihotri **Immigration** Consulting, as she gestures out the window of her second-storey office space along a busy commercial street.

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For outfits like Agnihotri, the abundance of unlicensed consultants in recent years has stolen away would-be clients, shrinking the market shares of honest brokers.

Agnihotri describes a meeting she had just hours earlier, where a banker joked that he was in the wrong business: immigration consulting is where the real dough is. A lengthy report by the Globe and Mail uncovered consultancy firms charging applicants tens of thousands of dollars for work permits, particularly in B.C. neighbourhoods near the U.S. border.

Agnihotri has heard of immigrants being charged as much as \$80,000 to secure Labour Market Impact Assessments (LMIAs), a type of work permit.

"Policy-wise, the government needs to wake up to this," she said. "We need much stricter penalties and sanctions put in place."

The issue has begun to filter down to voters. Some are particularly agitated over what they view as a rising number of foreign students, who are purportedly taking the places of local students.

"The influx of the student immigration population is increasingly a concern," said Gus Dhaliwal, whose 13-year-old son is refereeing a soccer game at an outdoor sports complex on a recent bright Saturday afternoon. Handfuls of others voice similar sentiments.

Liberal candidate Dhaliwal has repeatedly pushed back against such claims.

At a recent debate held at Surrey's Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Dhaliwal says worries over foreign students displacing local ones is unfounded - a position that has plenty of merit. Higher immigration rates, meanwhile, have largely come under the B.C. Provincial Nominee Program, which is administered by the provincial government and outside the purview of Ottawa.

Even so, the agency that oversees immigration consultants is a federal one. In June 2017, a parliamentary committee published a report that recommended solutions to the surge in unauthorized consultancy firms, including a new regulatory body aimed at weeding out illegal actors. But Ottawa has not yet implemented the regulations, and convictions remain few and far between.

In an interview, Dhaliwal says he has addressed voter concerns. He touts the Liberal's infrastructure spending program, which he says has brought significant new investment to the region.

"My record is very clear," he said.

Other voters say rapid immigration rates and a shortage of available jobs have caused an increase in gang affiliation among young people. A surge in violence in recent years has reached the point that the city decided to green light a local police force, which has yet to be fully established.

One resident who spoke to the National Post recalls a brazen drive-by shooting in August, when a Hells Angels gang member was gunned down at a drive-thru just after 9 a.m.

As part of his platform, Conservative candidate Singh has put forward a tough-on-crime agenda that includes a party promise to enforce longer jail sentences for criminals. As for immigration, he says Ottawa needs to introduce tougher policies that would crack down on immigration consultancy firms and increase penalties for perpetrators.

"Generally it's been said that Conservatives are against immigration - that's absolutely false," he said. "We believe in a fair, organized and compassionate immigration system."

"What I find is people are feeling frustrated with the political system here."

The NDP candidate, for his part, has said he would call for an inquiry into the surge of consultancy firms that target and recruit vulnerable immigrants, but failed to mention Ottawa's 2017 parliamentary study.

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At an NDP campaign barbecue, where volunteers serve halal burger patties and pakoras, a deep-fried vegetable dish, Singh Gill claims that residents in Surrey-Newton have not seen an improvement in such issues under the rule of his Liberal opponent.

"After nine years there was nothing that happened in this constituency," he said.

Nearby, the owner of the company hosting the event, Harjinder Dhaliwal, says his 24-year-old daughter was forced to study overseas in Ireland rather than in Canada, and he blames it on increased enrolment of foreign students.

"Our kids are not getting in because so many visitors are coming from other destinations."

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Graphic

Francis Georgian, Postmedia News Files; Voters in the Vancouver area are expected to play a significant role in deciding which party forms the next federal government.;

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