



At the forefront of ‘the new era’

Yes, she is youthful, but a wealth of experience has positioned Waterloo’s Bardish Chagger to be a politician on top of the times

BY JOHN ROE

If you want to meet the face of the new Liberal Party of Canada, meet Waterloo’s member of Parliament Bardish Chagger. She’s a woman. She’s a Sikh. And she’s the daughter of immigrants. She’s also young, at 36 years of age, far younger even than her boss, the fresh-faced Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

And while Trudeau is hands-down the most recognizable politician in Canada today, thanks partly to his unrivalled talent for snapping selfies, Chagger personifies as much as anyone the reconfigured political brand that swept the Conservatives out of office and vaulted the Liberals to power one year ago.

Chagger is also, with just over 12 months’ experience as an elected official, Waterloo Region’s most powerful politician, a cabinet minister but, in addition, the government’s House leader — the first woman to hold this job. When the prime minister leaves Parliament Hill for one of his frequent domestic or foreign excursions, it

is Chagger who speaks for him and the government in the House of Commons.

“For the moment, she is the star from this region,” explains Geoffrey Stevens, a seasoned journalist who has been commenting on the comings and goings on Parliament Hill for more than half a century and who writes a weekly column for the Waterloo Region Record.

“She’s the most influential minister from . . . Ontario west of Toronto.”

Or, as Luisa D’Amato, another Record columnist, gleefully observed: Chagger “is smashing glass ceilings as if they were champagne flutes.”

How did this unpredicted, even unlikely turn of events happen? What explains Chagger’s meteoric rise? Is it her unflagging energy? Her infectious optimism? Her unapologetic idealism or her intense focus on making Canada a better place? Or maybe good timing?

We could go back to her first job — working at

Bardish Chagger, Waterloo’s member of Parliament and a cabinet minister in the federal government, takes time out from a long list of local commitments for an interview at Waterloo’s Café 22.

PHOTOGRAPHY • ALISHA TOWNSEND



Left: Bardish Chagger addresses the House of Commons during the question period in September 2016. PHOTOGRAPHY • ADRIAN WYLD, THE CANADIAN PRESS



Below: Tristan Lehari (left), CEO of TritonWear, demonstrates a swimming metrics tracker for Bardish Chagger and UW swim coach Jeff Slater (right). PHOTOGRAPHY • MATHEW MCCARTHY

ments, Chagger is proud to describe her Waterloo Region roots. Born in Kitchener's St. Mary's Hospital, she was raised in Waterloo where she attended public elementary and secondary schools, then the University of Waterloo for a science degree. Her family, however, knows what it is like to be newcomers. Her grandparents and father arrived from India in the 1970s to work in a Waterloo carpet factory.

Those are the two sides of the Bardish Chagger coin — the local and the international, the grassroots Canadian and the child of modern multiculturalism.

Chagger grew up in a large, extended household that included her grandparents, her parents, a sister and brother, as well as an aunt and uncle and their three sons, cousins she refers to as her brothers. It sounds like a warm and lively place, where old customs were cherished and new ways tested, then embraced.

Yet life in Canada was not always perfect for the Chagger clan. At times, the family was the target of racist acts, which included having rocks hurled at their home and graffiti spray-painted on its walls. But they persevered, convinced Canada was their future and that by becoming politically active, they could make this country even better.

Looking back on the prejudice that once confronted her family, Chagger prefers to note with wonder how much the country has changed, and for the better.

a Tim Hortons at the age of 15 serving the public in what, after Parliament itself, must be considered one of the most Canadian institutions imaginable.

But let's introduce you to Chagger herself. Over coffee at Waterloo's Café 22 on a sunny November afternoon, she is friendly and frank as she talks about what matters to her most — her family, her community and Canada. That's what has driven her to

achieve things that have surprised even her. As for politics, it's the means to achieving ends that serve others.

"I never dreamt that I would be elected and I never dreamt that I would be at a cabinet table," she says, "but here we are in 2016 and the prime minister has asked me to take on additional responsibilities as the government House leader."

Modest enough about her accomplish-

It was from her father, Gurminder Chagger — or Gogi, as he's known to friends — that she gained respect for government-run institutions such as the public school system, which puts children from all backgrounds on a level playing field and where she learned to be fluent in French.

It was from her father, too, that the young Chagger received her political baptism — and her introduction to the Liberal Party of Canada. She was just 13. It was the game-changing 1993 federal election. Gogi Chagger enthusiastically backed the Jean Chrétien Liberals, grateful that they had modernized Canada's immigration rules and brought in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to afford new protections to minorities. And when Gogi went out to pound election signs into the ground, Bardish was with him, hammering away.

That was, as they say, the start of a beautiful relationship. At university, Chagger ran the Young Liberals Association and helped line up delegates for Paul Martin's leadership campaign. After graduating, she started working for Andrew Telegdi, who was then Waterloo's Liberal MP.

When Chagger was named the federal minister for small business and tourism shortly after the 2015 federal election, many observers were shocked. After all, in picking his cabinet, Trudeau had both the former chief of Toronto's police department and a retired Canadian armed forces general to choose from. They remained on the back benches. He chose Chagger.

But to look at the political experience she acquired through years of effort is to understand and appreciate Trudeau's choice. Chagger learned how Parliament Hill works from her days running Telegdi's Ottawa office. From her time in Telegdi's office in Waterloo, she discovered the importance of meeting the needs of constituents.

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“She took to it like a duck takes to water,” says Telegdi in a separate interview. “She’s a natural. She’s got the skills and understands how politics works.”

In addition to admiring her work ethic and people skills, Telegdi praises the “progressive voice” of his former assistant.

“When my staff was against me embracing same-sex marriage” in Parliament, “she was the only one who supported me,” he says, adding that Chagger also “supported the legalization of marijuana” before the Liberals made it official party policy.

“I feel very good to have been able to make her realize her dream and unleash her talents, which are obviously very many,” Telegdi says.

Chagger’s first sojourn in the world of federal politics ended abruptly after Telegdi, whom she considers one of her most important political mentors, was voted out of office in the 2008 federal election. Chagger moved on to work for the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre.

It was a perfect fit for someone committed to making Canada an inclusive land of opportunity, a place where if you work hard, you can get ahead.

Besides organizing the annual Multicultural Festival, she also helped run a special conference to enable foreign-trained professionals to obtain Canadian credentials and meet employers.

Even then, she had her eye on climbing to a different level where she could do more to build the community she envisioned.

It’s fascinating to wonder what would have happened had Chagger been elected as a Waterloo Region District School Board trustee when she ran for that office in the 2010 municipal election. Would she have contested a seat in the federal election five years later? We’ll never know because she lost in 2010. Yet, characteristically for Chagger, that cloud had a silver lining.

“I can’t say that I was disappointed that I wasn’t elected because I was proud that all

of a sudden we were having conversations that we weren’t otherwise.”

The political process, she says, is “not just about winning and losing, it’s about what you are contributing and how are you contributing. So to put your name on a ballot is a challenge. ... We need to encourage more people to do it.”

Before entering another political race, this one the 2015 federal campaign, Chagger added to her already extensive resumé. She served as president of the Kitchener-Waterloo Federal Liberal Association. She was a

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POLITICAL COMMENTATOR
GEOFFREY STEVENS

board member of the Workforce Planning Council Waterloo Wellington Dufferin, and the theatre group MT Space.

In addition, she belonged to the Waterloo Rotary Club and volunteered with Interfaith Grand River, as well as the Heart and Stroke Foundation.

Jobs like these might seem small stuff compared to what she’s doing now, footnotes to what will go down in the political history books. But with each new group or organization she belonged to, Chagger learned more about how Waterloo

Region works and gets things done.

She also became a known and visible commodity. It’s hard for her to walk down King Street without someone waving at her or rushing over to shake her hand. Her interview in Café 22 is interrupted briefly when a former French teacher spots her, comes to the table and the two embrace.

That kind of recognition helps explain why, by the 2015 election, Chagger was ready for her breakthrough. Both the riding and country, in return, were ready for change. She captured the seat with 29,752 votes, or 49.7 per cent, beating incumbent Conservative MP Peter Braid by more than 10,000 ballots.

That victory put Chagger on the first rung of the political ladder. The next step up was her appointment to cabinet which, while leaving political commentator Geoffrey Stevens “quite amazed,” later struck him as making perfect sense.

“She speaks to a demographic very important to Trudeau ... to young ethnic voters Liberals want to appeal to.” But “she’s much more than a token,” Stevens quickly adds. “She’s in a sense the future of what this government wants to do. She’s part of the new era.”

Or, to put it another way, with people such as Chagger in the federal cabinet, it looks more like Canada.

The right time. The right place. The right person. Everything clicked. And recently, with her appointment as government House leader, Chagger climbed higher still. In her new role, Chagger oversees the government’s day-to-day business in Parliament and negotiates with the opposition about bills and debates.

“She’s not the team captain, she’s the quarterback,” Stevens says of the House leader’s job. “She calls the plays.”

Stevens believes the previous Liberal House leader, Dominic LeBlanc, was deemed too confrontational by the prime minister. Chagger was chosen as his replacement, Stevens says, because the

Liberals “wanted somebody who would be more accommodating to the opposition.”

While he thinks Chagger “got lucky in terms of timing,” Stevens adds: “She’s well liked or she wouldn’t be in the job she’s in. And she’s doing it quite well.”

She is also doing a lot. During the week of her Café 22 interview for Grand magazine, Chagger was back in her riding with a staggering agenda that included the mundane along with the sublime. There were visits to elementary school classrooms and a Wilfrid Laurier University gender studies class, appearances at the opening of a Costco store and Communitech’s annual general meeting, as well as a funding announcement at University of Waterloo. This was also the week of Remembrance Day. In addition to attending ceremonies and events on Nov. 11, Chagger participated in the Sikh Remembrance Day and later the German Remembrance Day.

While such a schedule leaves few opportunities for personal pursuits such as hobbies, she loves walking and spending time with friends. And when she’s back home in Waterloo, the unmarried Chagger continues to live with her beloved extended family.

“No,” she says when asked if she’s in a personal relationship, then, with a touch of mischievousness adds, “I don’t even have a dog anymore.”

“My family, yes, is my backbone,” she says, pausing, then looking at the people sipping coffee around her. “But my family is way more than a blood connection. There (are) many people that helped shape the individual I am today, and there (are) many members of my family that don’t look like me. But they are members of my family.

“The people of Waterloo Region ... they are my family. They are who I will fight for. They are who I represent and they are the people who I care about.”



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