



ON THE FRONT COVER

FORMER PREMIER UJJAL DOSANJH, Q.C.

By Shari Graydon

The political activism of Ujjal Dosanjh, British Columbia's 33rd premier, was bred in the bone. Growing up in the Punjab in the early days of India's hard-won independence, he has many childhood memories of the lively political debates that constituted dinner conversation in the Dosanjh household. He learned at a young age the value of being able to vigorously disagree with an opponent while maintaining personal respect.

Consider this example. A band of people gathered outside his father's house to protest the policies of the Congress government, of which the elder Dosanjh was the highest-ranking local official. A very young Ujjal watched his mother—whose own father was a committed member of the opposition Communist party—walk out to join them. The incident generated no ill will within a household accustomed to such dissension (although it may well have influenced the future premier's attraction many years later to Raminder, another strong-willed, independent woman, who would one day become his wife.)

Despite Ujjal Dosanjh's start in a small Indian village, his story is a classic British Columbia tale. When he immigrated to Canada in 1968 after a three-year stop in Britain, it was to work in a Vancouver sawmill, pulling lumber off the greenchain. He'd obtained his first-aid certificate to get the job, but, ironically, it was an injury of his own that ended it. The back surgery that was required also postponed the studies he'd begun at night school.

Like politics, education was revered in the Dosanjh family. Both Ujjal's father and his grandfather had founded and operated schools in rural India. After recov-

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ering from surgery, the future premier attended classes at Langara College and then moved on to Simon Fraser University, where he completed his B.A. (Honours) in political science. After that, although his father had encouraged him to study medicine or engineering, Ujjal's growing interest in human rights issues led him to pursue law.

During these years his penchant for politics found a focus. As a teenager, Ujjal had participated in the Young Indian Association, a branch of which he established in Bedford when he first moved to England at the age of 17. There the focus was on facilitating integration into the rigidly stratified British society, and his earlier political education was augmented by exposure to Labour party MPs and activists and listening to security council debates on the BBC, improving his English in the process. Upon his arrival in Canada, an aunt introduced him to her CCF and NDP friends.

By the time Ujjal began his studies at UBC law school in 1973, family contacts had made him aware of the horrific employment conditions of immigrant farmworkers. He recalls that these "didn't reflect the fact that we were living in the 20th century", and they inspired him to put his growing understanding of Canadian law into action.

With fellow New Democrat and activist John Borst, he conducted research into the farmworkers' situation, obtained funding from the Law Foundation and set up the Farmworkers Information Centre to inform the workers of their rights and to support their legal claims. This advocacy led to summer work for the Human Rights Branch, providing outreach on human rights to minority communities, and consulting through the MOSAIC Immigrant Services Centre. He also taught English to new Canadians at Vancouver Community College (where his wife, Raminder, is now employed).

Ujjal graduated from UBC in 1976 and, after articling with Motiuk and Company, established his own general law practice, with an emphasis on family and personal injury cases. Mr. Justice Wally Oppal, who first met him during this period, recalls that "No cause was too small. No one ever got turned away from his office due to lack of money. He always cared for people, regardless of their financial circumstances."

Meanwhile, his political involvement continued. Motivated in part by his desire to continue advocating on behalf of farmworkers, he ran for office under the NDP banner, first in 1979 and then again in 1983. Both attempts were unsuccessful, but in hindsight it appears that his willingness to speak out against injustice was needed elsewhere.

In June 1984, when the Indian army went into the Golden Temple in Amritsar to flush out the extremists who had amassed weapons inside, the repercussions were felt halfway around the globe. A small faction within B.C.'s growing Indo-Canadian community imported the hostilities into the Lower Mainland. Most of the community did not support this, but threats of violence prevented them from speaking out.

Ujjal became a lonely voice of reason, no doubt steeled by the examples of his ancestors (his grandfather had spent time in British jails as a result of his civil

disobedience on behalf of Indian independence). Writing in the Punjabi weekly *Canada Darpan*, which was published by his equally brave friend Darshan Gill, and in interviews with mainstream media, Ujjal called for a stop to the violence, arguing passionately for a return to freedom of expression within the Indo-Canadian community.

He nearly paid for this act with his life. One night, while leaving his law office, he was attacked by a man wielding a iron bar who beat him so viciously that 84 stitches were required to repair the damage to his head and broken hand.

Judge Rick Miller, a classmate of Ujjal's in law school who had long appreciated his maturity and common sense, recalls this incident vividly. He was struck by his friend's willingness to continue speaking out about the need for moderation even after he'd been beaten, despite the dangers. "I deal with victims of violent crime a lot," he says. "His reaction was particularly brave."

During his physical and emotional recovery he could not participate in the 1986 provincial election. (Not surprisingly, his three young sons expressed grave concern about their father's commitment to public life.) But his activism and contribution to his community continued.

Fellow lawyer and friend Ravi Hira, Q.C., recalls Ujjal's performance in helping to mediate an extremely volatile internal battle being waged among different factions of the Songam Educational Society. Throughout a gruelling 14-hour meeting, interrupted by bomb threats and an evacuation of the building, he remembers Ujjal maintaining a calm and fair manner that ultimately not only helped to resolve the dispute but also ensured more cordial relations thereafter.

In 1991, Ujjal once again ran for office and was elected to serve the people of Vancouver-Kensington under Mike Harcourt's new NDP government. Not coincidentally, one of the government's first acts was to pass legislation ensuring that the minimum wage and health and employment standards enjoyed by all others in the province were also applied to farmworkers toiling in the fields.

As a rookie MLA, Ujjal initially served on the backbench and chaired the committee charged with developing recall and referendum policy. Then, in April 1995, he was elevated to cabinet as Minister of Government Services, also responsible for sports and immigration and, subsequently, human rights. Although his stint in the portfolio was short, he was proud of having put an end to any speculation about the province allowing video lottery terminals.

But fate permitted him only four months to really get his ministerial bearings before he was appointed to the senior cabinet portfolio of Attorney General, which, as it turned out, would be a very tough assignment. The day after he was sworn in as the province's chief law officer, he was informed that the RCMP were poised to hold a press conference about an armed First Nations blockade at Gustafson Lake.

The month-long standoff mobilized 400 police officers, the largest operation of its kind in Canada's history. B.C.'s new AG had long been a vocal supporter of justice for First Nations. But the protestors had fired shots at police, and a man who had grown up with Mahatma Gandhi's example of non-violent protest and

spoken out against violence in his own community was not about to change his political philosophy now. In what was to be the first of a number of crises in the job, he spoke out clearly about guns having no place in the fight for rights, no matter how just the cause.

Ujjal served as Attorney General for four and a half years. It was a profoundly rewarding time for someone who had gone into law and, subsequently, politics, because of his appreciation that legislation was a means by which people's rights could be protected and their lives improved.

Under his tenure the province undertook measures to ensure greater equality for gays and lesbians, and B.C. became a leader in terms of family law and restorative justice. Mediation was expanded as an alternative to litigation, and debtor exemptions were increased. Maureen Maloney, Q.C., who worked closely with Ujjal in her position as deputy minister and deputy Attorney General, expressed the view that "Ujjal was a great Attorney General. He was a man of absolute integrity and honour. He was also wise and cared passionately that people's lives could and should be improved by the activities of government. As an added bonus, he has a wonderful sense of humour and was great fun to work with."

As Attorney General, Ujjal also took on an active role in the issue of violence against women, representing the government in court on a case in which a man was given only a four-year sentence for stabbing his wife 40 times. Knowing a successful appeal would be an uphill battle, he nevertheless felt the principle at stake was important enough to be given the weight of his office.

Rachel Notley, who served for a time as his ministerial assistant and is now a Workers' Compensation Board advocate, recalls his thoughtful open-mindedness and willingness to examine both sides of an issue. At the same time, she says, he could also be extremely stubborn. "In the lead-up to the 1996 budget, he fought vociferously for the maintenance of courthouses, out of his strong belief in the importance of access to justice."

Ravi Hira notes that the role of Attorney General is an especially challenging one, often not fully understood by the general public or many politicians themselves. The position requires its holder "to walk a fine line between being a partisan politician and being the non-partisan chief law officer". Ujjal, he says, appreciated the distinction very well and always acted with dignity, putting his role as chief law officer first, despite the political consequences this sometimes involved.

His election as leader of the NDP in February 2000 after the resignation of Glen Clark placed him at the helm of the province during a particularly troubled time in his party's history. He knew it was unlikely that he would be able to significantly alter the fortunes of his government with only 14 months left in its mandate. However, he continued to advocate for the things that he believed in, even when doing so was unpopular.

Judge Rick Miller cites Ujjal's "integrity, honour and moderation" as his most significant contributions to politics. As one who had the pleasure of serving him

as press secretary for his year in the premier's office, I echo that assessment. I watched him remain calm and measured in the face of angry protestors and personally invasive reporters. I witnessed him forbid his colleagues to reveal damaging information about a political opponent. And I saw him risk his job just a few months after being elected on the strength of his commitment to delivering what he had promised and believed in. (The issue was balanced budget legislation, enormously contentious within his caucus and seen to be a vote of confidence. Yet Ujjal was prepared to lose the vote, resign and call an election just four months into his premiership, because such a defeat would have left him with his integrity intact.)

Since leaving public office last June, he has enjoyed the luxury of spending more time with Raminder, his wife of 30 years, and their three sons, Pavel, Aseem and Umber. He has turned his attention to long-deferred reading and gotten back into running for exercise instead of for office. And he is looking forward to reinvigorating and expanding his legal practice, working with former partner Thomas Woolley and two recent recruits to the profession, sons Pavel and Aseem.

It is a measure of their respect for their father that Pavel and Aseem followed him into law and—after articling with Miller Thomson and Watson Goepel Maledy, respectively—they are proud to share the Dosanjh shingle with their father.

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