

Canadian, and ready to vote

A globe-trotting life has kept Madan Lal Bassi out of the voting booth - until today

Darah Hansen and Doug Ward
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Burnaby resident Madan Lal Bassi has accomplished many things in his 63 years of life.

He is a husband and father, a veteran of the Indian Air Force, a speaker of at least four languages, a globetrotter, and proud new Canadian citizen.

Today, he will add "voter" to that list as he casts a ballot in the federal election for the very first time.

"I am very excited," Bassi said of the opportunity to finally participate in the democratic process.

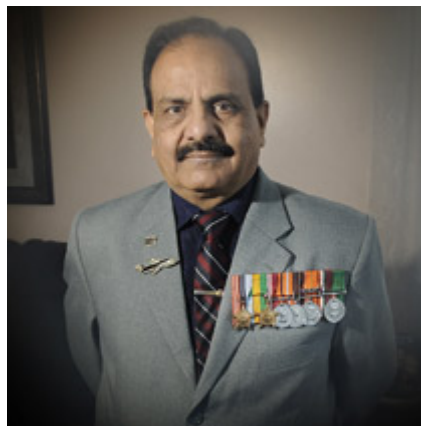
"I've been watching Stephen Harper and [Stephane] Dion and the other guys to see how they can run the country better," he said.

Bassi said it was his military service that originally kept him from voting in his native India. For 15 years, until he was 36, he was stationed far away from home and never able to cast a ballot in his home town in the Punjab.

After leaving the air force, Bassi went to Doha Qatar and the Sultanate of Oman where he worked as a senior safety and security officer for about two decades. Again, he was unable to vote.

In 2002, he immigrated to Canada, and became a citizen in August 2007.

"It was a very important and emotional day for me. For the first time in my life I was able to vote, something I never did in my country in India because



CREDIT: Bill Keay/Vancouver Sun

Madan Lal Bassi, who became a Canadian citizen in 2007, has done his election homework and looks forward to casting his first federal ballot today.

most the time I remained away," he said.

Bassi hasn't wasted any time getting ready for the big day.

He's registered with Elections Canada and spent the past few weeks combing through newspapers and listening to radio to better inform himself on the candidates in his riding and their party platforms.

He even sat through the televised leader's debate on Oct. 2.

Days before the election, Bassi had narrowed his choice to the NDP and Liberals, but remained undecided as to which party was stronger on his top issues, including the environment, the economy and health care.

His final choice will be made in the privacy of the ballot box.

"I'm ready," he said.

Bassi is ahead of the curve when it comes to the experience of most Canadian newcomers and first-time voters, said Nick Noorani, an immigrant advocate and publisher of the Vancouver-based Canadian Immigrant Magazine.

According to a recent informal online poll conducted by the magazine, 69 per cent of readers surveyed said they don't understand how the federal election process works.

Meanwhile, 72 per cent of those surveyed said they weren't aware they are legally entitled to take time off work to vote.

Noorani said the numbers could mean many people who are eligible simply just won't vote. "It's scary," he said.

"If they don't know how to vote and how to engage in the political system, there is a huge problem."

Susan Friend of Elections Canada said her office is doing all it can to reach immigrant communities across the country, with "ethno-cultural" outreach identified as a priority, along with aboriginals, the homeless and youth.

Friend said those who want more information should go to the website (www.elections.ca) where information about the election system is available in 27 languages.

Included in the package is information on acceptable pieces of identification at the polls and translations of the elections card which were mailed out prior

to the election.

More than 130 electoral districts with high non-English speaking populations, including Richmond and Delta, have also been assigned community relations officers to work directly with the communities in the ongoing effort to answer questions and help get people registered to vote.

"There's lots you can do to get yourself informed," Friend said.

According to the informal poll by Canadian Immigrant Magazine, top issues among Canadian newcomers include the economy, health care, jobs and skills recognition, followed by law and order and family reunification.

When asked which party best represents immigrant issues, no federal political party stood out as a champion, with the Liberals, Conservatives and the NDP ranking about equally (25 per cent, 25 per cent and 23 per cent respectively).

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For full coverage of today's election go to vancouversun.com/decisioncanada

A VOTER'S GUIDE

To be eligible to vote you must be:

- 18 years old or older
- A Canadian citizen

Am I on the list of electors?

- If you received a voter information card in the mail, you are on the list.
- If you didn't receive a card, you can verify whether you're on the list by contacting your local Elections Canada office: online, go to electionscanada.ca and click on "Voters" under the "Information for You" banner, and then choose "Returning Officer;" or call toll-free 1-800-463-6868.
- If you're not on the list by election day, you can still vote. Elections Canada recommends finding out ahead of time whether there will be a registration

officer at your local polling place; if there is, you can register by showing the appropriate identification, then vote.

About the voter information card:

- Cards are mailed out to people on the list of electors several weeks before the scheduled election.
- Recipients should check cards carefully to make sure their names and addresses are correct, and contact the local Elections Canada office if there are errors.
- The card contains the address of the polling station where you need to go to vote.
- Take the card with you to the polling station.

How do I know where to vote?

- The address of the appropriate polling station is on your voter information card.
- If you didn't receive a card, contact your local Elections Canada office.
- You can find out online by going to electionscanada.ca; go to "Information for Voters" and click on: "Where do I vote?"

What ID do I have to have?

There are three options:

1. One piece of original identification, containing photo and address, issued by a government agency; for example, a driver's licence.
2. Two original pieces of identification of a sort that have been approved by the chief electoral officer. Both must contain your name and one must contain your address; for example, your health card and hydro bill.
3. Swear an oath and be vouched for by an elector who is on the list of electors in the same polling division who does have acceptable pieces of identification; for example, a neighbour or roommate.

When do I vote?

Voting times are staggered so the majority of the results are available at approximately the same time across the country. In B.C. communities vote

during these hours:

Mountain time: 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m.

Pacific time: 7 a.m. to 7 p.m

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