

## **Mark Persaud**

# **From street life in Toronto to hero for Canadian immigrants**

**By Jasminee Sahoye**

A GUYANESE-BORN man who left Guyana for Canada in 1983 has been named advisor to Canada's Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity, Jason Kenney.

And he knows what it's like to be a newcomer to Canada with little or no support.

He started his life in Canada as a homeless person in Toronto. The Scott Mission, a Toronto-based Christian organisation that works with the destitute rescued him from the streets in winter.

A week ago, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced at a function in the city of Mississauga that Mark Persaud, who chaired the Liberal Party of Canada's Standing Committee on Multiculturalism until last year, had joined the Conservative Party.

"Since the formation of the new Conservative Party of Canada, the party has been growing," said the prime minister. "Accomplished people like Mark Persaud are recognising that all Canadians have a home and a future in the Conservative Party."

"Like many immigrants, I have come to realise that the Liberals are all talk and no action when it comes to getting things done for Canada's ethno-cultural communities," said Persaud.

"The new Conservatives exemplify the entrepreneurial and pro-community values of New Canadians and quite frankly they've delivered."

"We are building a country where what matters is what you've done and where you're going and not where you're from or who you know," said Kenney.

Persaud, who attended Queen's College and grew up in Georgetown, has been working with new Canadians and immigrant communities for the past two decades, and said he readily accepted the job offer since it's something he is "passionate about."

"I've been passionate about reaching out to these communities over the last 20 years or so. One of the reasons I sought the position of multiculturalism some time ago in the Liberal party of Canada, the national executive level, was exactly to be in a position where I could inform the government, the party and others of some of these issues and hopefully get them to recognise and address some of them. I was not successful in doing that during my tenure...."

He has distinguished himself as a civic leader providing leadership as a tireless volunteer with numerous organisations, some of which he started, on a wide range of social issues including refugees, homelessness and poverty, human rights, community development and bridge building among Canada's diverse communities. He has earned a number of distinctions and recognitions for his work.

Persaud, a trained lawyer, said one of the first things that need addressing is to refine the approach to Canadian multiculturalism and Kenney is determined to look at a number of the critical issues.

"There are very critical and pressing issues affecting many of Canada's ethno cultural communities."

Citing, the Somali community as an example, he said it has been going through some tough times, noting that many young people are falling vulnerable to crime and there is a high unemployment rate.

“We can’t have a one size fit all; we have to tailor our programmes to meet the specific needs of these communities. We also have to present a coherent vision of what is meant to be a Canadian, what is Canadian identity and what multiculturalism should mean in terms of how do we refine it for the future, also the present,” he said.

Persaud, who received the Queen’s Golden Jubilee Medal for leadership and community service, earned both his LL.B. and LL.M and held a broad range of positions as a prosecutor, counsel to the RCMP and civil litigation counsel.

Prior to attending law school, he was the founder of the Toronto United Church Refugee Relief, a refugee and immigrant aid organisation he coordinated for five years, providing counseling and settlement services for refugees and immigrants from all regions of the world.

Currently, he is the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian International Peace Project (CIPP), a non-partisan organisation that has brought together diverse Canadians and Canadian organisations to work on domestic and international issues of peace, security and development. He will continue his role with the CIPP.

Last year he was nominated for the prestigious Seoul Peace Prize.

Through Persaud’s vision, an 80-year-old mosque was restored, that once was the centre of activity in the village of Andkhoi, Afghanistan, as an outreach project by Canadians from all backgrounds to demonstrate their support for ordinary citizens of Afghanistan who are struggling to rebuild their lives and communities after decades of civil war.

“This unprecedented project by Canadians of diverse backgrounds to reach out to Afghanis and show our support as they struggle to bring peace and stability to their war weary country is a powerful illustration that ordinary Canadians can make unique contributions to peace, security and development in any part of the world.

It is a wonderful statement of Canadian pluralism and Canadian values at its best which the Canadian International Peace Project strives to foster domestically and internationally and which is so desperately needed in many areas of the world,” said Persaud.

CIPP Governor, David Kilgour said: “Mark Persaud has done many years of bridge building among communities, peoples, nations and regions, based always on equal human dignity and opportunity for all.”

According to John Tory, Leader of the Ontario Progress Conservatives, “The quiet, consistent work Mark Persaud does to bring people and communities together is making an immense contribution to our ability to succeed in one of the most diverse societies on earth.”

Ed Morgan, law professor at the University of Toronto and national president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, described Persaud as a Canadian national hero.

“Mark works with a low profile, toiling constantly to bring communities together without calling attention to himself, all aimed at making this a better society for all.”

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