

# NDPers who question Jagmeet Singh's abilities sound like Trudeau's critics four years ago: Harper

Paul Brigg

SINGH, Jagmeet

2.

TIM HARPER/  
TORSTAR NETWORK  
17 Aug 10, 2017

If one follows the money and buys the buzz about party membership sales, Jagmeet Singh has the obvious inside track to the NDP leadership when voting begins next month.

On one front, choosing a young, stylish Sikh would be the type of bold move many in the party feel is needed to compete on the same stage as a Liberal government led by Justin Trudeau, who appears at mid-term to have maintained his iron grip on the political centre.

Singh certainly has the backing of what would be considered the party elite.

They will tell you the former Ontario deputy NDP leader has the type of people skills that cannot be taught, that he has a gift of getting people to follow, something that often eludes politicians with more experience or gravitas.

But many of those same party stalwarts will also confess to a bit of nervousness about Singh, which indicates they see his ascension to the leadership as a gamble, and if these misgivings are not dislodged - or if they mount closer to voting - it will be clear this race is not yet decided.

Singh has lapped the field when it comes to fundraising. He raised \$356,784 from 1,681 individual contributors in the quarter ending June 30. He did not officially enter the race until mid-May.

Northern Ontario MP Charlie Angus raised \$123,577 from 1,285 individual contributors after leading the first quarter. Manitoba MP Niki Ashton raised \$70,156 from 1,006 contributors, although she is surging and said she raised \$100,000 in July. Quebec MP Guy Caron brought in \$46,970.

Singh also leads in party endorsements, by at least one measuring stick, and is expected to bring in the most new members when those sales are cut off Aug. 17.



Torstar photo

Bramalea-Gore-Malton MPP and former Ontario deputy NDP leader Jagmeet Singh appears to be the frontrunner in the federal NDP's leadership race. Brampton MPP and former Ontario deputy NDP leader Jagmeet Singh appears to be the frontrunner in the federal NDP's leadership race.

So with the candidates debating in Victoria on Wednesday and Singh leading on all measurable metrics, this game is essentially over, right?

Well, those same members of the party establishment bring asterisks with their support and know the grassroots of the party have not yet fallen in love with the candidate from Brampton.

There are those who wonder whether it is really wise for the party to try to "out-Trudeau" Trudeau.

Those backing Angus dismiss the style argument and point to the appeal to youth of social democrats such as Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn.

They will tell you that Singh's inexperience on the federal level has shown in debates, and he may be finding the jump from provin-

cial politics to the bigger federal stage more difficult than he thought.

He is vulnerable on a policy proposal that would scrap old age security and roll it into a means-tested seniors benefit, breaking party policy on universality.

There are concerns about Singh's "authenticity" and the hope he would show party members and ultimately Canadian voters a little bit more about himself and a little less about how he markets himself.

And, as he looks more like the prohibitive favourite, there are pragmatic questions.

As he mobilizes Sikh supporters, some New Democrats are openly wondering whether those who will mark a box to support Singh in the leadership will stay with the party. Is Singh himself a

tourist in the federal party, ready to head back to the provincial wars if he loses?

And, they wonder, should he win, where he would run? There is no such thing as a safe NDP seat left in this country, and many rue the early days of Jack Layton's reign when a leader without a seat could not break through with voters by perpetually standing in front of a mike in the Commons foyer.

For the NDP, this 2017 race is shaping up as a battle between the party establishment and the grassroots.

Ashton has run an unabashedly leftist activist campaign, giving a voice to those who feel on the outs with the party establishment. Her apparent strength spooks some party members who feel she may be kicking aside party planks

for political gain.

Angus, who has had to take time away from the campaign to deal with a family matter, is trying to emerge as the consensus candidate with deep support in the party base.

Caron is respected for his economic bona fides even if he lacks the curb appeal of the other candidates.

The NDP establishment has a spotty leadership record (see Audrey McLaughlin, Alexa McDonough, Brian Topp). The grassroots understandably regard it warily.

But this, too, should be kept in mind.

Questions about Singh's style, depth and debating skills sound suspiciously like the questions being asked about Trudeau four years ago.