

Judi Tyabji: A Star is Elected

By
Holly McNeil



Mom, Judi, and dad Kim enjoy a moment with Tanita, the first baby born to a B.C. MLA while in office.

Victory came as a surprise to just about everyone except the winner. When the votes were counted on the evening of last October 17 and young Liberal candidate, Judi Tyabji, was declared the new MLA for Okanagan East, a collective "wow" reverberated throughout the district. The 26-year-old woman, pregnant with her third child and a relative unknown, had a background in the environmental movement and had flirted briefly with the New Democratic Party. She was clearly not a traditional choice: yet she handily defeated both a Social Credit cabinet minister and a well-known NDP activist.

"I knew I would win. I could feel it. People were looking for a change. They knew I wasn't a one-issue person," says Tyabji. A combination of

the anti-Socred sentiment and her own "community network" gave her the confidence despite the fact local pundits were calling for a narrow Social Credit return in Okanagan East, which includes Rutland and Winfield.

She was, she says, confident enough to seriously look for a nanny during the campaign and consider the home renovations necessary to house that extra person. Campaign office manager, Rachel Linge, says Judi kept asking if she was ready for her new job as constituency assistant. Rachel laughed – then. Today, she is holding down the fort at the Okanagan East headquarters in Rutland.

The post-election 'wow' element that bounced around the constituency was two-fold: on the one

hand, people greeted the new face and image as a breath of fresh air. Tyabji's perspective was bound to be different, and local media found her an enticing subject. Her first projects, like a dance to raise funds for the homeless, were given plenty of airtime and headlines.

On the other hand, people wondered just how a young mother of three preschoolers with minimal political experience was going to manage the practicalities of everyday life as well as representing them in Victoria.

Just as Tyabji is a non-traditional choice, so has she created a new brand of Okanagan political representation. A trip to her office is an eye-opener: there's crayons and coloring books on the coffee table and a noticeable absence of any big

B y H o l l y M c N e i l

VIP desk. At 106 145th Asher Road, the street front office of Judi Tyabji consists of a lobby and two substantial rooms furnished with board tables.

Tyabji is the first to point out her support network is not with any business association, wherein many political empires have been nurtured.

"My network was with the people of the community. But I understand the importance of their business concerns and the economy. I'm looking forward to working with the Chamber of Commerce. Broadening my base of understanding and knowledge is very important," says Tyabji.

Despite the warm welcome she has been given, Tyabji acknowledges there will be some – perhaps many – critics of her informal brand of representation. As a case in point, the process of getting this story together began hesitatingly. Messages went unanswered for weeks until, finally, an appointment was arranged – three weeks down the road. In another scenario, Tyabji had been personally sympathetic to a local Parents Advisory Council concerned about traffic safety but there was no follow-up letter per the traditional methods.

Yet, both situations were eventually dealt with. Tyabji, in an advanced state of pregnancy, talked candidly with *Okanagan Life Magazine* about her background and the personal intricacies of her new job. The interview ended when it was time to pick up her son from playschool! The Winfield Parents Advisory Council was surprised by a visit from Doug Symons, Liberal transportation critic, during the shadow cabinet's visit to Kelowna in February. It seems they had not been forgotten after all!

Confident, competent, serene are all descriptions that come to mind during the initial January interview. They are reinforced at Kelowna General Hospital, on March 16, two days after the birth of her third child and one day before the opening of the B.C. legislature. Tyabji is packing, with the help of husband Kim Sandana, to go home for the afternoon before flying off the next morning to Victoria.

The opening day was a showcase for Premier Mike Harcourt's new NDP government and for

Gordon Wilson's Liberal opposition, recently returned from the political hinterland. Tyabji is an important cog in the Liberal wheel, as Opposition environmental critic and the only Liberal elected in the interior. She is the youngest mem-

then to Kelowna in the mid-1970s. Judi and her siblings attended Kelowna's Catholic schools, St. Joseph Elementary and Immaculata High, while residing in the Glenmore district. Her dad, Alan Tyabji, was vice-president of Calona Wines for awhile and now owns Okanagan Vineyards Winery in Oliver.

In 1986, Judi graduated from the University of Victoria with a bachelors degree in political science. "I didn't even know what an MLA was five years ago – my degree was in international politics," she says wryly. Upon obtaining her degree, Judi went to work for the federal Liberal party as executive assistant on the National Revenue Committee in Vancouver.

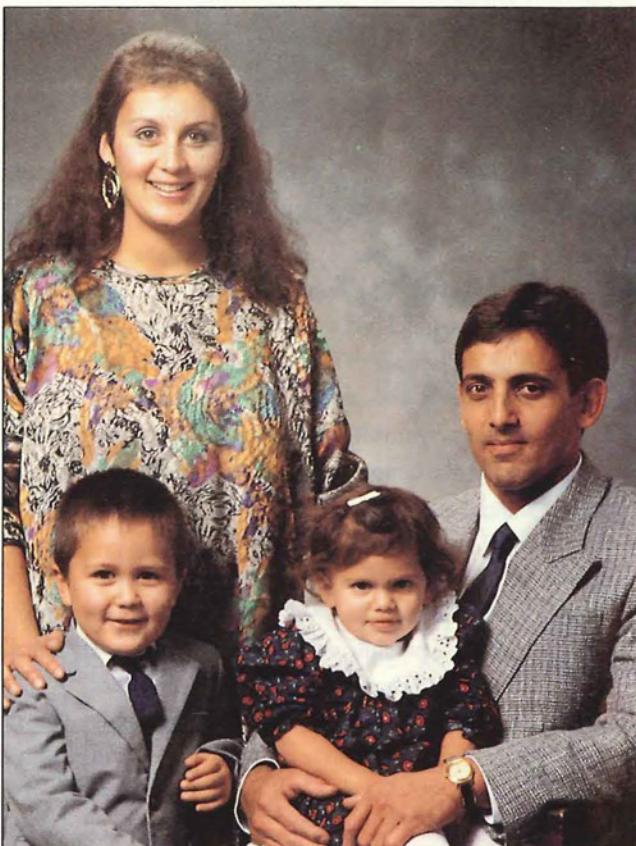
"It was a dynamic job. John Turner's (national Liberal leader at the time) office was beside mine . . . and we were involved in putting on all the gala events. It was high-powered and exciting."

But, on one of her trips home to Kelowna, Judi met Kim Sandana and fell in love. She remembers how she'd heard about this good-looking judo instructor, and knew where he worked. She swears it was by accident that she went shopping at this particular Safeway store, where he'd recently been transferred, and it was love at first sight.

After their marriage, Judi commuted between the Vancouver job and her new Black Mountain home. Kim is nine years older than she and both wanted a family. But, Judi says: "Having children is a big decision for a woman. Inevitably, it means putting your career on hold . . ." In 1987, she became pregnant and quit the commute to Vancouver.

Gordon Wilson had just been elected leader of the almost non-existent provincial Liberal party and he asked Judi to be his regional representative. She agreed, came home to Black Mountain and began building her "community network," as well as being a somewhat lonely Liberal in the central Okanagan.

"I got involved in a lot of things, out of a concern for the community, for my children. When you're having a baby, suddenly everything is in sharp focus. I wasn't thinking as I went along, that this is a stepping stone for a political career."



The Tyabji-Sandana family before the historical 1991 election:

Judi, son Kasimer, daughter Kiri and husband Kim. member of the B.C. legislature (in recorded history) and the only one who has given birth while in office.

"The campaign only lasted three months but I've been working toward this for eight years," declares Tyabji. In fact, it was more like a lifetime.

Judeline Kim Tyabji was born in Calcutta, India, to English and Indian parents. She was raised to respect the family name that goes back many generations to the time of Gandhi. In fact, Judi and her two sisters have chosen to keep their family name rather than take the name of their husbands.

"The Tyabji name was synonymous with political reform in India," says its newest standard-bearer. "Part of the family philosophy was: If you think you have a solution to a problem, it is your responsibility to try to put it in place."

The Tyabji family moved first to Toronto and

Soon after she'd come home, a by-election was called in Penticton and the provincial Liberals were desperate for a candidate. "It was hard to find someone, the provincial party was so much in the wilderness," Tyabji recalls. "It was bad. Being a Liberal sometimes ran against you in doing business: you might be considered a flake!"

During the search for a representative, Judi became a mother. A couple of weeks after giving birth to a healthy baby boy, her dad invited her for a visit. "I thought he wanted to see the baby. Kasimir was two and a half weeks old and growing awfully fast. . . ." But her father had other things on his mind besides being a grandparent, and advised his daughter to let her name stand for nomination.

"I hadn't given it a thought . . . I told him, 'I just had a baby, I have an ethnic last name, I'm a woman and this is Social Credit territory. Are you crazy?'"

But the seed had been sown and when she returned home to find support from her husband, too, the young mother decided to give it a try. "When I won the nomination, I realized just how strongly I felt. That campaign really helped me to focus."

Tyabji lost the battle to NDP Bill Barlee, currently minister of agriculture, but it was an indicator, she believes, of the turn of Liberal fortunes. "The focus was province-wide. It took the party from two per cent to 11 per cent of the vote."

During the next few years, she became involved with the environmental movement, as both a volunteer and a paid worker for Earthcare

of Kelowna. "Every person is an environmentalist," Tyabji proclaims. "So you can't be judgmental when you're discussing solutions . . . I fully believe that decisions have to be made in consort with business, not from an adversarial stand."

She and Kim operated Okanagan Home Tutoring Services. Judi taught English, French and Math up to a Grade 10 level "so I got first-hand experience in the local education system." She became secretary for the group lobbying for the extension of the Kelowna sewer system up to Black Mountain, and she gave birth to her first daughter, Kiri.

Over the years, Tyabji maintains she has attended many agriculture meetings and forums. With a youthful background in vineyards and an adult affiliation with the fruit industry — she and Kim live in the Sandana family orchard. "I became very involved in the agriculture sector. During the campaign, people recognized me as somebody who wasn't just at meetings to collect votes . . ."

Tyabji's concern with the new national Liberal leadership under Jean Chretien, caused her to look for new affiliations. "I knew I wasn't a Socred, and I chose the NDP because of my concern with the environment . . . But I very shortly realized they didn't have the same approach to government." She describes them as being too antagonistic.

Her brief membership with the NDP was also a learning process, she says, because she realized that if she couldn't make the transition from Liberal to New Democrat philosophy, many others

would be in the same situation. They would be looking for an alternative at the polling booth.

When the provincial Liberals split with the federal party in the spring of 1991, Tyabji came back into the fold. At a party gathering in Murli Pendharkar's backyard, the executive named Judi to the candidate's position. Pendharkar, who has been a federal Liberal candidate in the Okanagan and is a stalwart among local Liberals, helped to get Tyabji's campaign organized.

"She is a very well composed person," he says. "There is no doubt she is a very appealing individual, knowledgeable and well spoken." He chalks up the Okanagan East win partially to discontent with the Social Credit leadership, but mainly to the personal popularity of both Liberal leader Wilson and candidate Tyabji.

Pendharkar, now a school trustee in Kelowna, admits the election results took him by surprise. "I knew we would do well this time around, but I was not sure we would necessarily win."

Will Gow, another staunch worker during the campaign and now president of the federal Liberal constituency association, contends he was convinced of the win halfway through the campaign.

"It was the right leader, the right candidate at the right time. Timing is everything in politics." Gow describes Tyabji's performance as "consistent and steady . . . She has a good grasp of the issues. When she started talking (at campaign forums, etc.) people forgot about the non-issues, about being a woman or her youth."

However, the fact of her gender, her youth and her motherhood has put Tyabji very much in

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the spotlight. A photograph of her newborn babe was flashed across news service wires the day of the legislature opening, and it was declared that she had "made history" three days later during her maiden speech in the House.

Tyabji is very much aware of the stardom and the potential for disappointment. "I'm breaking so much new ground here, and people expect so much. It's different when expectations are low." In addition to judging her political performance, the public will also be watching her mothering capabilities. "They'll be wondering, do my kids walk around with colds because I'm not around?"

Her ability to stay cool and calm will no doubt be a mainstay. How has the stress level been since the election? She laughs quietly in response: "It's much better . . . Now I have a nanny who takes care of all those chores. My skills are not in housework or laundry, they are in problem solving. And my husband and I find we have more time with the kids than before."

She counts her blessings. She and husband Kim now both have solid incomes; they have the support of Kim's mother and a nanny and "Kim is very supportive, very determined that we will make this work. I'm, much luckier than many women today."

Tyabji has an exasperated smile for all the intricacies of the dual existence between Black Mountain and Victoria. The nanny and the baby will live with her in a "character suite" in a Victoria heritage home, a familiar accommodation from her years of university. On top of arranging this, she must also adhere to the dress requirements of the legislature which states that women – not necessarily men – should appear in a different outfit each day.

"So I had to consider this as well as the fact I would be nursing, that my size would be changing, that they had to be 'easy care' clothes – I wasn't going to go shopping for all that so I've got a dressmaker working on it!"

What does she hope to accomplish? Making inroads in environmental awareness and recreating confidence in politicians are topmost on her agenda. She'd also like to help garner enough excitement for the Liberal party that they become the government in the next election.

Oh, yes, she and Kim would also like to have another baby – but not until all the hoopla has subsided just a bit! ■



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