

Healthy Democracy Forum
Remarks for HDP Advisory Group Chair Jasvinder Sandhu
Saturday October 19, 2024
Westin Harbour Castle Toronto – Regatta Room
Approximately 8:55 am

Thank you Madam President.

And good morning fellow democracy champions.

As a former candidate and municipally elected official, and as a woman from a racialized community I understand the need for a Healthy Democracy Project.

The conditions Robin spoke about are keeping qualified people from all communities from running for office or keeping them from running again. It's keeping people from working in municipalities. And yes, it's keeping them from voting.

And it's not just about elections. It's about everyday community decision making. It's about the need to feel safe raising your hand to serve or to stand up to disagree with a decision or policy.

Two years ago next month, the AMO Board supported the Healthy Democracy Project and gave it a budget. The first priority for the project team was to assemble an advisory group, which is full of unique and remarkable individuals from different backgrounds who are aligned and united by common passion and goals.

It's as the Advisory Group's Chair that I'm standing here this morning to welcome you to this Forum.

As Chair I also want to thank and commend the AMO Board for its leadership and courage to create space for this project. And for supporting it enthusiastically.

This weekend is a tipping point of sorts for the Project. Tipping from the initial work of developing strategies, new partnerships, and foundational research to the next phase—doing.

To experimenting and piloting projects. To learning, growing, adapting, iterating, and sharing.

While the barriers to political and democratic participation are real—they aren't insurmountable.

And that's where this project and where we all come into the equation.

As we get into it today, I want to share a couple things I love about this project.

First, it's aspirations. To affect change at the surface and at the roots. This project isn't about writing reports—it's about doing.

And second, it's about how we work together. It's about bringing joy, compassion, optimism and hope to our shared challenges.

This is hard work. But we can still have fun together, and we can celebrate each other's successes. While at other times we can be there to lean on each other.

DRAFT

The optimism I mentioned is grounded in a belief that there are more good actors in our democracies than polarizing, divisive ones. The problem is that the good actors aren't as well organized as they could be.

And that belief in good actors is proven true by how many of you are here today. And maybe even more in how many young people are one floor away talking about these same challenges.

Our optimism comes from how many people, how many of you, are already doing this work—and have been doing it for years, and in some case, for decades.

The Healthy Democracy Project is designed to support that work. Today's conversation about attracting and supporting diverse representation hopes to honour the work of trailblazers, campaign school founders, volunteers, advocates, and everyone who has raised their hand and said—I'll stand and serve my community. I can make a difference.

It's been my pleasure to work alongside the AMO team as part of the Advisory Group. And during that time I've come to better understand the lane that AMO occupies—their work is in support of their members, elected officials from almost all of Ontario's 444 municipalities.

That's their lane. We all occupy different lanes in this work, different spheres of influence. One of the main reasons from assembling us all together is so that we can be aligned in our work. Through collaboration we can increase capacity and have a bigger combined impact on the health of our democracies.

Another reason we're all here is to know that we're not in this together.

You are all democracy champions. Thank you for the work you do in your communities.

And thank you very much for taking time away from your personal lives, thank you for travelling here from different parts of the province.

We appreciate that effort.

Thank you very much and enjoy your time at AMO's inaugural Healthy Democracy Forum!