FROM REFUGEE TO MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

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By Dikran Abrahamian MD, Ontario, 10 May 2022

Everybody has heard of the American Dream. The Canadian version is not that well known although as valid and potent as the American. A good example of the Canadian dream is the career of Ontario politician Aris Babikian who landed in Canada as a refugee fleeing the Lebanese Civil War and after years of community and political activism served as Citizenship Judge and was then elected to the Ontario provincial parliament four years ago. He is running for re-election in early June's provincial elections. Babikian's impressive career had a slow start and took years of hard work before it soared.

I first met him in 1995. It was a casual encounter at a wedding. Over years, through third parties I learned that he had come to Canada in 1978 as a refugee and with no financial means. He was originally from Aleppo, not so long ago a vibrant social and cultural Armenian centre. Babikian had basic education and barely spoke English. He did all sorts of odd jobs to survive.

As a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), Babikian participated in the Armenian Community Centre activities. Thanks to his social skills, friendly nature and perseverance, he was elected to various positions in the organization and steadily climbed the social ladder. A little over a decade after our first encounter, we met in a confidential setting. He talked about a project to get the Genocide of Armenians taught in Ontario secondary schools. He said the initiative was in its preliminary stages, and cautioned us not to publicize the project so as not to alert the "usual suspects" from sabotaging the plan.

By the end of the first decade of the new century Babikian was recognized as a leader in the Armenian community and by the authorities. He was a pragmatic team worker: ideological differences were no hindrance to him as he focused on common projects. To the dismay of some die-hard bureaucrats in the ARF, Babikian had cultivated intricate relations with people and organizations of the "opposing" Armenian camps attending their cultural and other events including "Keghart"'s. In 2009 he was offered the prestigious position of citizenship judgeship. He served in that capacity from 2009 to 2015. He was the second Armenian to serve as citizenship judge. Sarkis Assadourian, who previously was a member of the federal Parliament (1993-2004), had held a similar position.

Fast forward to the present; Aris Babikian was elected member of the provincial parliament (MPP) in 2018 representing the Scarborough-Agincourt riding. As an incumbent, he will face opponents from the Liberal and NDP parties in the June 2 elections. Babikian is running as a Conservative Party candidate. For registration and other details people may access the official Ontario Government site at Get ready to vote in Ontario's provincial election.

Looking back at his past four years at Queen's Park, one is filled with admiration for his accomplishments. For details I would refer to his website and the Facebook page.

With respect to the Armenian community, it is worth mentioning

- The provincial and federal governments providing more than $3 million to expand the Armenian Community Centre's Youth Centre.
- Ontario Proclaiming May "Armenian Heritage Month"
- Allocation of Long-Term Care beds (Սեփական Հայ Ծերանոցի 25 տարուայ երազին իրականացումը)
- Promoting Equity, Tolerance and Reconciliation Through Genocide Education is significant for its enduring value. It is developed by the Zoryan Institute and funded by the Ministry of Education. Aris Babikian's role in securing the funds was crucial. We often hear expressions such as "Never again" and "Lest we forget". They refer to prevention of mass murders and Genocide. History and present events tell us that without a citizenry, specially the youth component, not sensitized in matters of prevention the potential of human calamities will still be there. Even the most cultured countries were not immune. This program will instruct the youth to recognize the right path for its future and future of humankind.

The constituency in Scarborough-Agincourt riding and the Armenian community in Ontario would be proud of these accomplishments which were brought to success in the four years of MPP Babikian's service.

During a recent get-together over coffee, Babikian was asked about his plans for his second term. For details about his response, I'd refer to his campaign website. Among other plans, it speaks about a new Birchmount Hospital with an investment of $ 1billion.

Being a descendant of Genocide survivors, Babikian has dedicated a large chunk of his career to issues such as human rights, war crimes, and man's inhumanity to man. A current concern of his is to facilitate youth participation in community and socio-political activities at the provincial level. He plans to engage youngsters to serve as interns for MPPs. That would be a great start to train youngsters for political careers.

Despite our ideological and political differences, I salute Aris Babikian for his pragmatism, perseverance, and dedication. Good luck in the upcoming election.

Comments

Nairi Meras – 2022-05-17 05:50:53
Mr Aris Babikian's perseverance is an inspiration to everyone.

H – 2022-05-11 12:44:05
Thank you for the informative article about MPP Babikian. Honor and respect for his achievements. Helping to introduce the Armenian youth to the intricacies of politics in Canada and elsewhere is one of the best avenues for reversing the malaise of today and redefining the values of nationhood. Thank you.

Vahe Hayrikian – 2022-05-10 10:43:28
Good article and we all should be supporting his re-election

ANTOINE STÉPANE TERJANIAN – 2022-05-10 04:01:10
Well said Dr. Abrahamyan. It is people like yourself and Aris Babikian who make Canadian-Armenians proud.