

What Really Happened in Hamilton-Centre with the NDP and MPP Sarah Jama

When the NDP removed Sarah Jama from caucus, she was silent in her defense, leaving people in Hamilton Centre in the dark about NDP machinations behind her removal. It's time for the story to come out

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Darling you got to let me know. Should I stay or should I go?

This is a hard piece to write. I've known the story for some time but held back details because reconciliation with the NDP has always been Sarah Jama's hope, along with her many supporters in Hamilton Centre, including the riding executive. It's Sarah's story to tell but she entrusted it to me and I've tried to respect that in anything I've written. My position has always been that what happened to Sarah Jama was wrong and if allowed to stand sets a dangerous precedent for political speech in Canada as well as highlighting how anti-Palestinian racism is silencing voices in our politics.

Hopes for a reconciliation were definitively dashed with the nomination of Robin Lennox in Hamilton Centre in a process that has left NDP supporters in that riding with questions no one wants to answer.

It's also hard because we're in the midst of an important election, one that has implications for Ontarians far into the future. It's no secret I'm not a Doug Ford supporter. The Conservatives under Ford have been abysmal for Ontario families. I've written on it too many times to link. Any threat to the surety of the vote in Hamilton Centre is a challenge to good governance in Ontario. And the surety of the vote in Hamilton Centre is under threat.

If the Conservatives win in Hamilton Centre from a split vote, like they did in Hamilton East Stoney Creek in 2022, it'll be the NDP's fault due to their intransigence in the face of good counsel. It didn't have to be this way.

To recap. Sarah Jama was the acclaimed candidate for the riding of Hamilton Centre. Jama is a popular disability rights and anti-poverty activist who has ruffled feathers with her support for those living in encampments, tenants' rights, for realigning police budgets and advocating for Palestine. It was her involvement with pro-Palestinian protests that brought her to the attention of the pro-Israel lobby, which has been actively trying to shut her down for years. And by actively, I mean calling her employer to complain about her politics trying to get her fired. Or mounting smear campaigns to limit her popularity.

Jama signed up a record number of new NDP members. She won with 54% of the vote. It was rosy days.

So what happened? How did things get so bad?

I sat down with Sarah not long after everything blew up. We had a candid discussion about the realities of political life and the challenges faced by someone with an activist background when confronted with the strictures of the party line. Like most things, reality can be very different from perception. While Sarah may have felt she had graduated to the big table where the adults talk about important issues and work to provide solutions, in reality it was more like high school, with tone policing and tattle-tales ready to complain about whatever it is she did wrong. Again. That was my analogy. She agreed.

We talked about the difficulties of coming from grassroots organizing into the structured world of party politics. One of the accusations made against Jama is that she was “difficult” to work with, that she wasn’t a “team player” an amorphous allegation hard to defend against. Yet her reputation locally is as an exceptionally collaborative colleague and a compassionate advocate for others. People who work with her like her, some will say they love her.

It doesn’t jibe. Her defense is her own modus operandi, rooted in collaboration, consultation and a careful consideration of what will do the least harm to the most people. Her existence is too close to grassroots organizing to be anything but.

It’s always tease, tease tease You’re happy when I’m on my knees.

One particular instance is illuminating. While out on the grounds at Queen’s Park, Jama encountered a group protesting a cause she herself has long championed. She joined the protest, said a few words in support of the group, who were very grateful that someone from inside QP stopped to give them the time of day because no one ever does. Jama knows that. That’s why she stopped. A complaint was raised by a colleague and Jama was reprimanded. Another example came to me by way of a different source, who relayed a conversation they had with an MPP who complained about Jama’s frequent absences in the legislature, unaware that she had permission to be absent. People looking for fault often find it. Real or imagined.

As Jama asked rhetorically in one conversation: why didn’t they just approach me themselves and say something?

The work environment at Queen’s Park is like the work environment everywhere. We shouldn’t expect it to be different. People look side eye at the new person who stands out as a keener, who doesn’t know the ins and outs that others do, who asks questions loudly. Instead of helping, they complain to the boss about their behaviour or their clothing or whatever it is that causes them irritation or the thought that someone is “getting away” with something. They create the difficulties. Not everyone, but enough to make noise consistently.

Jama thought she was among equals when in reality it was a highly structured environment where communication is tightly controlled. Think Conservatives and Ford’s alleged injunction against local candidate debates as one extreme. The NDP should be at the other, with some latitude for MPPs to speak on issues before them. Should be, but they’re not. More on that later. Reality vs perception. The party system by its nature cancels personal autonomy.

Exactly whom I'm supposed to be. Don't you know which clothes even fit me?

Jama's politics are no secret. NDP leadership should have known what to expect before welcoming her with open arms into the party. If they didn't, there are enough pro-Israel organizations highlighting the fact for the NDP leadership to ponder. What did they think they were getting beside the hundreds of new members she brought with her? Did they overlook her passionate support for Palestine the way they were able to grit their teeth and take her position on policing? Up until Oct 7, there was no reason to talk about Palestine in Ontario politics. Did NDP leadership just cross their fingers and hope nothing would happen?

Of course, no one thought the genocide of Palestinians was just around the corner, but the NDP has a history of problematic decisions with respect to their MPPs vis-à-vis Israel. Jama was advised to not talk about Palestine, but the events and aftermath of Oct 7 presented an unprecedented situation that Jama felt demanded attention, where many of her constituents were looking to her for support. The party was saying nothing while statements flooded the media sphere. And why not talk about Palestine anyway? Where is that censorship coming from?

The issue that bust everything open was the Hamas attack on Oct 7 and the statement made by Sarah Jama in support of the many innocents in danger on both sides and calling for a ceasefire. In the deluge of official statements supporting the right of Israel to defend itself, Jama's stood out as against the current. As expected from someone with knowledge of the issue, she contextualized the conflict, prefacing it with a UN statement made by a special rapporteur. It was the statement to be expected of a thinking person with longstanding knowledge of the issue and a vision of the nightmare to come. Its only fault was to not condemn Hamas, which Jama did the following day.

It was not enough to placate her detractors. Who, it must be stressed, are highly organized, very vocal and very partisan.

Jama agreed to read a statement in the legislature to calm the situation down. As she had already made a public apology, she wasn't going to make another and told NDP leadership so. Not while Israel continued to bomb and kill Palestinians indiscriminately. The statement she was given by the NDP to read was not the statement she agreed to make. In that moment, the ask was too big, the duplicity of NDP leadership too blatant to excuse, and she refused. She was immediately removed from caucus. Immediately like they knew this would happen. Immediately like it was a set up. And just as immediately the Ford government passed a motion to deny MPP Jama speaking rights in the legislature while several of her supporters waved a protest banner and chanted from the visitor's gallery.

Jama was accused of putting people at risk through her statement. Who they would be at risk from wasn't clarified, yet this risk is the unspoken elephant in the room. Who was making death threats? Who was complaining about Sarah Jama? And importantly, who gave them the power to create an uncomfortable and unsafe work environment for the MPP and her staff, as well as usurp the decision of the people of Hamilton Centre with their threats and get away with it? How is it the fault of the MPP that hate is directed toward her for advocating for a ceasefire and a way forward peacefully for everyone?

Discussions with others in the know said that NDP leadership was in the process of crafting their own statement when Jama made hers. In talking about that time, Jama referenced how no one was saying anything, that there was nothing coming from leadership and she felt compelled to make a statement. Already thousands of Palestinians had been killed in the bombing. She felt she owed it to her constituents who were contacting her about their fears for themselves and for family in the war zone. Jama talks about how long it took her and her team to write it out, how carefully they crafted it to ground it in the reality of the situation, to be meaningful. It was the silence from leadership that pushed her to say anything in the first place.

The events of Oct 7 were horrific. The days that followed were chaotic as reports of atrocities were exaggerated and emotions ran high. Some direction from leadership would have been welcome. It didn't come. That no one on the team crafting the Oct 7 statement consulted with Sarah Jama shows remarkable oversight, a failure of leadership especially given her historic vocal support for Palestine. Did anyone reach out and ask her if she was ok?

I asked Jama about NDP on-boarding. Was there a process she went through that introduced her to the particulars of party politics, of what she can and cannot say, outside of Palestine. Was there a manual regarding expectations? Any direction as to when to defer to the leader and when she can speak for herself? One would assume a mass process for the new MPPs post-election. But what did they do for their by-election MPPs? Was she thrown in without any structured guidance?

Pretty much. Which isn't to say she didn't receive support from peers as they could when they could and get directions for specifics. The basics were covered about the legislative assembly and bathrooms and how HR works. And she's appreciative of the support she has received from colleagues who offered it. But in our conversations Sarah referenced an unwritten manual that other people knew about, but she didn't. And if she just had access to the manual, then she'd know how to conduct herself so people who kept complaining would stop.

Ahhh. The unwritten manual. Anyone with a job knows what that is.

Activism has an ethos of due process in a "walk the talk" kind of way. They're comfortable holding each other to account, with doing the hard work of working through disagreements to reach consensus. Of saying what needs to be said, not with malice of intent, but for clarity of purpose. They're typically flat organizations as compared to hierarchal ones. Everyone's on the same page with regard to goals, they're unpaid and committed to change over preserving the status quo. The status quo is the largest unwritten manual there is.

If you say that you are mine I'll be here 'til the end of time.

Both the professional and personal cost to Sarah has been astronomical. It takes some kind of special strength to pick yourself up and keep going after the amount of vitriol that's been spread around about your reputation. After being defamed and censured in the legislature. It's a testament to the strength of her character and her supporters that she hasn't given up.

The fallout for the riding has been disastrous. A solidly strong NDP riding since its inception in 2007, Jama's predecessor was NDP party leader and former leader of the opposition Andrea Horwath. The entire riding association, with the exception of three executive members, left to join Jama at the newly formed Hamilton Centre Independent Constituency Association. There was still a matter of constituent representation after all, and Jama was the elected representative with a seat in the house. Censured, but still a seat. The show must go on as they say.

Only now it's significantly hampered by the removal of party supports. Jama was left with nothing, again, immediately. No email access, no office, no supports. She and her team had to rebuild everything from the bottom up. This is what the party did to the voters of Hamilton Centre because party leadership couldn't find a way to work with another equally elected MPP because she was "too difficult." Or an alternative reading is that they succumbed to the continual smear campaign by the pro-Israel lobby, unable to find a backbone to stand up for Palestinian human rights and in defense of Sarah Jama.

The remaining three executive members worked to bridge the divide and see if they could mediate some kind of rapprochement between NDP leadership and Sarah Jama. They haven't spoken about what's been happening out of fear they'd jeopardize Jama's chances of return, but they want to clear the record particularly as it pertains to perceptions of Sarah Jama. They feel she has been maligned throughout this process.

It's not Jama who's being "difficult" to work with, but an intransigent and autocratic leadership who would take no good advice and who seem willing to sell out the riding either for "face" or to appease pro-Israel supporters, either in Hamilton Centre or surrounding ridings.

In their discussions about Jama, the executive members focus on how deservedly popular she is. They talked about how unfairly she was treated by NDP leadership. And they talked about the myopic vision of NDP leadership. Jama brought new excitement to the riding. She signed up over 600 new members, many of them representing the next generation of NDP voters. Understandably, they were concerned about the future of the NDP and saw Jama as an injection of hope and an inspiration for the next generation.

There was considerable speculation in the left community as to who could win against Jama's popularity. Many had hoped, and in fact pleaded with NDP leadership to not run a candidate in Hamilton Centre as it would surely split the vote maybe enough to see either a Conservative or Liberal win. If Stiles were intent on beating Ford, as she says she is, she would have put pride aside and made up with Jama or taken the hit and walked away from Hamilton Centre altogether, conceding the loss as a bad decision. Not really a loss anyway, as Jama's politics align with NDP politics; she would be an ally not a foe.

Many people wanted to see a reconciliation happen. Jama has support among the local labour organizations, who have stood up for her time and time again. I am told by riding sources that she has support among some NDP executive members, and she has support within the NDP caucus. Yet NDP leader Marit Stiles has been adamant that her return would not happen.

This indecision's buggin' me. If you don't want me set me free.

In the face of her considerable support, the Ontario NDP executive voted unanimously to commission a report by the director Kevin Beaulieu, exploring the “election scenarios” for Hamilton Centre including the option of letting Sarah Jama run again under the NDP banner. In commissioning the report, the executive council expressly stipulated that interviews be conducted with riding association executives and local labour union representatives. When the report was filed, it was apparent that only a few superficial consultations had been completed, leaving the executive to produce their own report which was tabled in camera. The upshot of this second report was the decision by the executive to instruct the director to respond to Jama’s request for a nomination application, which was still very delayed and which took several requests to reach her. When she did submit her package, she didn’t get a response for several weeks. In the interim, she had to declare her intention to run as an Independent. The NDP were using delay as a weapon.

If Jama applied and went through the process it would be likely she would win due to her popular support. When the NDP refused her nomination, it was a shock. The reasons offered by the NDP centred on her current status as an Independent candidate, her intention to run as an Independent should she lose the NDP nomination, and her removal from caucus.

I asked Jama about her intention to run as an Independent if she lost the nomination. She denies ever suggesting it. Her response was: “I have never stated that ever. That’s a bit self-absorbed.” This isn’t about Jama, really, it’s about due process and whether there was any. Jama knows that.

The fact that she continues to be an Independent is a direct result of the actions of the NDP in removing her from caucus. The fact she was removed from caucus was a travesty of democracy by the NDP in the first place. Her reinstatement should come as a demand from the people, the leadership should respect that. These facts existed before she was given the nomination package. Who is making these decisions?

In the time since Jama was expelled, the provincial executive has stonewalled an annual meeting for the riding association for over a year, with the local executive being told the atmosphere was “too hot.” A meeting was ultimately scheduled thirteen months after Jama’s expulsion only to be cancelled by the provincial office the night before. The riding association has had no opportunity to process the crisis, no opportunity to respond as a riding association to the provincial decision, no opportunity to elect new riding leadership. The riding lost the support of many long-time members who quit because of what party leadership did to Jama. As well as the people looking to reconstitute a new riding association who had no party to join, with only three members at the time, and no chance to grow without provincial office support. I know people who have left to join the Liberals.

Then there is the issue of the NDP convention, originally scheduled for January but cancelled by NDP leadership, ostensibly to focus on the upcoming election. The party constitution requires a convention every two years, but it’s been more than three years since the last one. As one exec member put it, how exciting could it have been going into an election right after a rousing provincial convention? It was seen as a lost opportunity to rally the ridings, bring attention to party policies and energize the membership. Besides which, the reinstatement of Jama was on the agenda for discussion and there was considerable support among delegates for that to happen. Another opportunity to address the issue publicly. Cancelled.

Which brings us to the nomination meeting on Feb 3. The NDP process says nomination meetings are on hold while there is a nomination under review. The NDP was holding approval of Jama's nomination, yet there was pressure to hold a nomination meeting. In response to insistence from the riding association executive, the provincial office forwarded their decision to Jama on January 26, a week before the nomination meeting, scheduled for February 3. At that time, there was only one candidate from Hamilton Centre, Robin Lennox, who was approved to run. Until January 28, that is, when Aisha Jahangir from Guelph parachuted into the riding with an approved nomination and absolutely no chance of winning. I was told by someone who knows that previously another NDP hopeful, Zaigham Butt, who submitted an application in Hamilton East Stoney Creek where he lives and where he has run before, was approved to run in Hamilton Centre and he refused. Butt did not respond when questioned.

Up until the parachute landed, there was still hope the membership who supported Jama could force the issue by voting 'no' or somehow otherwise spoiling their ballot as the candidate would require fifty per cent plus one to win. That way, Hamilton Centre wouldn't have an NDP candidate to run against Jama. But once the parachute touched ground, that tactic was shot down.

There was even talk among members to elect the parachute candidate to increase Jama's chances in the election. That's how angry people were and how betrayed they felt by NDP leadership. Sarah Jama never lost the support of a good number of NDP members and committed volunteers who pounded the pavement to pull in the vote. Betrayed is the word they used.

Lyla Mikos, a long-time supporter of the NDP and someone who has gone through an NDP nomination process, shared on Facebook her experience with the nomination meeting. She reflected on past meetings, where the union hall was filled with hundreds of members. Membership has taken a hit. The number was now reduced to about 30 souls who braved the cold to attend in person along with about 125 people on Zoom.

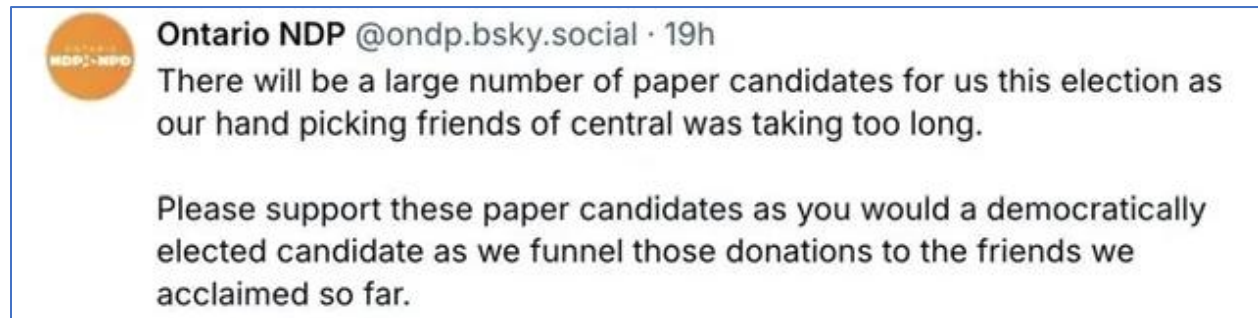
I spoke with another attendee, a long-time member, who said that because of an unknown-to-them 30-day processing pause between paying dues and voting in a nomination, they were denied their right to vote at the nomination meeting. It's not sure how many people were affected as some had returned in the hope of Jama's re-nomination. Some left when they found out that Jama had been denied the nomination process.

Mikos ended her Facebook post with this poignant description of the meeting:

"This meeting ended up being about 30 people having a group therapy session [talking about the in-person discussion] Members shared their anger, sadness, disappointment and frustration about how we all got to this place. Again, NEVER have I ever attended a nomination that went down like this before.

People were feeling tired and broken and as Fascism continues to burn out of control just next door us Progressives need to have as much fight in us as we can muster, because the threat coming our way is very REAL and it will require all of our collective strength to defeat it."

What happened during the nomination meeting raises questions about provincial office interference in local riding decisions. Where did the parachute person come from? Did they really think they were going to win? Were they a plant to interfere in the process? Maybe a “paper candidate” that the Ontario NDP references in the below post? It raises questions.



Source: Bluesky post from the Ontario NDP.

But more importantly, it highlights the length to which some in the NDP would go to refuse to even consider Sarah Jama as a candidate. Why are they so afraid of her? To be so intransigent in the face of such popularity and renewal is puzzling. For many people, the severity of the punishment did not fit the crime. No way, no how.

Matthew Green, federal MP for Hamilton Centre, has long been a champion for Sarah Jama. Their offices are next to each other on Main Street. It's important to note that the provinces run their own parties and the federal party doesn't hold the same line about Palestine. Many federal pro-Palestinian NDP MPs have spoken out with no repercussions from their party. Why the disconnect?

I forwarded a series of questions to Kevin Beaulieu, ONDP Provincial Director asking him for comment on specifics like: Do you have proof Jama said she would run win or lose? Did the leadership indicate they were making a statement on Palestine to MPPs? What was Jama's on-boarding process like? Was there a clear process in the decision making to remove Jama? Did she have an opportunity to answer accusations publicly? Who was making death threats to MPPs, were the police involved, and was there any follow-up? Where did the parachute candidate in Hamilton Centre come from? Among others.

After follow-up, his staff responded with the following statement which says nothing in regard to the specific questions I asked, particularly around Jama's intention to run as an Independent should she lose the nomination, which seems a pretty damning accusation. Proof is hidden behind confidentiality concerns. Conveniently.

Statement by the ONDP:

"Candidate applicant vetting is a standard process undertaken by all parties during every election. Our party followed the vetting and appeal process, approved by our Provincial Council, that applies to any Ontarian who seeks to run for us. This process is confidential."

Two other candidates with connections to the community applied to seek the nomination in Hamilton Centre and were approved, and local NDP members voted to nominate Robin Lennox.

All candidates agree to consistently represent the party's policy positions and abide by the majority position of the party, despite any good-faith disagreements. All MPPs are provided onboarding both by the Legislative Assembly and by their respective caucus, support through several different caucus staff teams (HR, communications, research, outreach), and are expected to work with their colleagues and the leader as members of the caucus."

In closing, yes, I'm wrapping it up, thanks for making it this far, I want to consider briefly a document forwarded to me a couple of months ago by the authors who address the issue of activism within NDP parties, both provincially and federally. In the evolution of NDP ideology, the "goal of a post-capitalist socialist society" has given way "in favour of managed reforms within a capitalist economy." In this change, there is no space for the "revolutionary." Their article published in Socialism and Democracy, maintains that "the NDP not only fails to advance a critique of capitalist society or movement towards a post-capitalist society, but rather suppresses such activity."

They argue that without electoral reform, specifically proportional representation, nothing would permit or allow the emergence of a "left-centred post-capitalist party that would invigorate the political left in Canadian politics." In making their argument, they refer to the Waffle movement in the late 1960s, the New Politics Initiative from 2001, the Leap Manifesto of 2015, the disqualification of Anjali Appadurai's leadership bid for the BC NDP in 2022, and the expulsion of Sarah Jama from the Ontario NDP. They assert that failure to adopt and exploit radical change results from the NDP's "ongoing unwillingness... to position itself as a transformative grass-roots, social democratic, democratic socialist or socialist party." This is a failure of NDP ideology.

Robin Lennox describes herself as an activist. I hope she's paying attention. She could learn a thing or two from Jama's example. Consider it an introduction to the unwritten manual, somewhat similar to the hidden curriculum in medicine.

The NDP have forgotten that they're supposed to be the radical alternative. They may never hold a majority government no matter their pragmatic turn to neo-liberalism, hobbling any authentic participation of the radical in the political process. Their only hope is to embrace the radicalism to push progressives further. People on the left want change and people who see a different future need a political home. Getting rid of young, popular advocates is not the way forward. Finding a way to work with them by bridging the generation gap is.

If anything is to be taken away from this piece it's to correct the idea that Sarah Jama was "difficult" to work with. She wasn't. She was dedicated, enthusiastic and committed to her work. She, and others like her, are the future. Get used to it.

Thanks for taking the time to read. It took some time to write. I'll sign off with a favourite song of mine, one that's been playing in my mind as I write this. Could you tell? Might as well be your ear worm too.

References:

- The Clash's music video for "Should I Stay or Should I Go":
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMaE6toi4mk>
- Toba Bryant and Dennis Raphael, "The Old Mole and the New Democratic Party: Why the NDP is an Impediment to Social Progress in Canada", Socialism and Democracy, 2024.

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