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NEWS



Liberals Marianne Dandurand, left, Fares Al Soud, and Conservative Grant Jackson are all former staff who've been elected to sit in the House of Commons. *Photographs courtesy of Facebook*

'It makes a lot of things easier': ex-staffers turned MPs say Hill experience proving a boon

BY LAURA RYCKEWAERT

Becoming a first-time MP can be a daunting experience, with a host of new rules to learn, staff to hire, offices to set up, and new colleagues to meet. And with Parliament making its fastest post-election return in three decades, former federal staffers elected to sit in the House of Commons for the first time say their prior Hill experience is helping to ease the transition.

"There are a lot of new MPs. When I went to the orientation sessions, I felt … privileged to have [had] this experience in Ottawa [and] know how it works," said Liberal Marianne Dandurand, who attended House of Commons-led orientation sessions in Ottawa the week of May 5. Dandurand was elected to represent her former boss' riding of Compton–Stanstead, Que., on April 28 with 45.6 per cent support.

"Having been there … knowing mostly how it works, knowing what it looks like, the schedule of an MP—when you're going to be in the riding, when you're going to be in Ottawa—all of this, you have to learn it when you're a new MP. There's a lot of it that I know already, so it's an advantage. It makes a lot of things easier," leaving more room for other new information, said Dandurand.

Dandurand has had an "eclectic career path." A former innkeeper, she went on to cover the eastern townships as a journalist for *La Tribune*. From there, she got into communications and marketing, and later joined a marketing research startup, Orange K, during which time she also began teaching communications and statistics courses at the Université de Sherbrooke. But then came COVID, which dried up business, and coincided with the end of her teaching contract.

It was good timing when, in the spring of 2021, then-Liberal MP Marie-Claude Bibeau went looking for communications help in her Compton–Stanstead constituency office. Dandurand took up the job, and was later part of Bibeau's 2021 re-election team—marking Dandurand's first time working a campaign. Post-election, Bibeau hired Dandurand as press secretary in her office as then-agriculture minister, later promoting her to director of communications. Dandurand later followed Bibeau to the national revenue portfolio as communications

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NEWS

New housing minister's 'first-week jitters' on home values needs clarification, says policy expert Mike Moffatt

BY STUART BENSON

Prime Minister Mark Carney can't afford to allow first-week cabinet jitters to dilute his government's messaging on the housing crisis, says economist and progressive policy expert Mike Moffatt. But to truly address affordability, the government will have to admit that homeowners won't be able to keep all the value.

"The prime minister is willing to acknowledge that housing prices do need to fall, but the housing minister would not," said Moffatt, an associate professor of economics and public policy at Western University's Ivey Business School. "Overall, Canada now seems to have two parallel housing policies: one from the prime minister, and one from the housing minister."

Writing for *The Hub* in the immediate aftermath of the cabinet shuffle on May 13, Moffatt, an executive with the Smart Prosperity Institute and host of the *Missing Middle* podcast, described the selection of former Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson (Vancouver Fraserview–South Burnaby, B.C.) as Carney's (Nepean, Ont.) newest housing and infrastructure minister as a "high-risk, high-reward" decision.

However, in his first week, Robertson produced "far more risk than reward," Moffatt told *The Hill Times* in a May 15 interview.

Less than 24 hours after being named to the role, Robertson had already created the impression that he and Carney "are not on the same page" regarding how to solve Canada's housing affordability crisis, Moffatt said.

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NEWS

'Really, scared, anxious, and horrified': advocates decry lack of voice for Canadians with disabilities in cabinet

BY MARLO GLASS

As an "inadequate" Canada Disability Benefit is launched, advocates are decrying a lack of representation for people with disabilities in Prime Minister Mark Carney's cabinet.

"Our community is really, really, scared, anxious, and horrified," Donna Jodhan of Barrier Free Canada said in an interview with *The Hill Times*. "I can only personally plead with Carney—please think of us."

Jodhan says it comes as a particular shock after having a minister responsible for people with disabilities for nearly a decade, until Carney's (Nepean, Ont.) pre-election shuffle, which significantly pared down the cabinet he inherited from former prime minister Justin Trudeau.

A ministry for people with disabilities was first created by the Trudeau Liberals in 2015, with then-Liberal MP Carla Qualtrough holding the title in tandem with the sport portfolio.

Jodhan was among those who led the campaign for the Trudeau government to adopt the Accessible Canada Act in 2019. The act prohibits disability-based discrimination in the federal public service, Crown corporations, and all federally regulated organizations.

"I still thank prime minister Justin Trudeau for having taken the time and listened to us to appoint a special minister [in Qualtrough]. And she was special," she said.

Qualtrough has a vision impairment, is a three-time Paralympic medalist, and was a human rights lawyer before joining politics. She held several other cabinet positions including public service and procurement, and Treasury Board president, but was responsible for the

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‘It makes a lot of things easier’: ex-staffers turned MPs say Hill experience proving a boon

More than 100 first-time MPs were elected on April 28, and are now readying for Parliament’s fastest post-election return since 1988.



Now-Trade Minister Maninder Sidhu, left, with Fares Al Soud, Liberal MPs Parm Bains and Iqra Khalid, and former MP Omar Alghabra. *Photograph courtesy of X*

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director, becoming chief of staff roughly one year later—her most recent role.

Dandurand is one of more than 100 first-time MPs taking seats in the 45th Parliament. With 28 days between the election and the first day of the new Parliament on May 26, this year marks the fastest return to business post-election since 1988 when MPs had just 21 days to get situated before diving into business.

One of the youngest MPs elected this year, Liberal Fares Al Soud, 25, has likewise crossed the staffer-MP divide and has been elected in a riding previously represented by his one-time boss.

A Palestinian Canadian, Al Soud won the race to succeed Omar Alghabra in Mississauga Centre, Ont., with roughly 53.9 per cent of the vote.

Al Soud’s time on the Hill similarly began in 2021, in his case with a summer internship in Alghabra’s office as then-transport minister. Still working towards an undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM), Al Soud joined Alghabra’s office part time at the start of 2022—while also juggling work for the Canadian Red Cross—shifting to full-time hours over the summers, including in 2023, the year he graduated. In Alghabra’s transport office, Al Soud had largely been an operations assistant, but also tackled issues management work. He went on to work as a tour and planning assistant in then-prime minister Justin Trudeau’s office, and as policy adviser to then-fisheries minister Diane Lebouthillier, spending his final weeks as a staffer as acting director of policy to the minister.

Having clocked experience in a range of roles, Al Soud said he definitely feels more prepared stepping into the job of MP.

“I’ve had a lot of fortune in terms of the things that I’ve been able to do across the Hill in these few years, and so now walking into the House getting ready for the session, I know that I’m ready. I know that I’ll be better situated than most [rookies], and I’m very grateful for that,” he told *The Hill Times*. That includes remembering to check his personal parliamentary email address—something he recalls frequently reminding his former bosses to do.

Conservative Grant Jackson, who was elected to succeed his former boss Larry Maguire in Brandon–Souris, Man., with roughly 62.2 per cent support, has more recent political experience as a member of Manitoba’s legislative assembly to lean on in stepping into the role of MP, but said his time working federally is nonetheless a boon amid the “whirlwind” of new information coming his way.

“It certainly helps a little bit, although I will say, when I worked here, of course, we were still in Centre Block, so West Block remains a bit of a maze to me,” said Jackson, who was in town last week for his orientation. “But certainly in terms of the process, in terms of the services that are available like the Library [of Parliament], what they do, how they can support MPs’ offices, all those types of things are not new to me, just more of a refresher because I have been gone from the federal side for six or so years now.”

Jackson worked for Maguire for a little more than five years in all between 2014 and 2019, largely while also studying history—with a minor in geography—at Brandon University. He spent his summers working in Maguire’s Hill office in Ottawa, returning to work in the riding during the school year. Jackson went on to work provincially, including as a special assistant to then-Progressive Conservative justice minister Cliff Cullen, up until 2023, when he ran and was elected as the MLA for Spruce Woods.



Grant Jackson was most recently a Manitoba MLA. *Photograph courtesy of LinkedIn*

Now back on the Hill, Jackson returns to a few “familiar faces,” including now-Conservative MP Branden Leslie, who worked in various roles federally between 2010 and 2019, including as an MP’s assistant and as a cabinet staffer, and has represented Portage–Lisgar, Man., federally since a 2023 byelection. “[We] were staff at the same time,” said Jackson of Leslie. “There’s lots of people working for MPs who I worked with or worked at the same time [as], so yeah, it has been a bit of a reunion coming back with lots of familiar faces, which has been very nice.”

Making the leap

Dandurand began considering making the leap to seek elected office last fall. Bibeau announced her decision not to seek re-election federally and instead run for mayor of Sherbrooke, Que., in October, after which Dandurand said people began reaching out to suggest she run given her knowledge of the riding and its challenges, both from working for Bibeau and from working in the region since her days at *La Tribune*. (Dandurand herself was born and raised in the neighbouring riding of Brome–Missisquoi, Que.)

By the end of the year, she’d made up her mind and applied for nomination. At the time, the Liberals were dragging in the polls, and expectations of victory were scant. As a result, Dandurand said she saw this year’s election as a chance to lay some groundwork and “get ready for the next one.”

Dandurand was acclaimed as a Liberal candidate on March 9—the same day now-Prime Minister Mark Carney (Nepean, Ont.) was elected to take over the party helm.

She left her job as Bibeau’s chief of staff to start campaigning right away. With a new leader and new threats to the Canada-United States relationship emerging courtesy of U.S. President Donald Trump, Dandurand said she felt the winds shift. “I felt it during the campaign, and it was very good energy around the Liberals.”

Unsurprisingly, she said she’s “very happy about how it turned out.”

“It’s an immense privilege to get to be a Member of Parliament, to get to be the voice of the people in my riding,” said Dandurand.

Al Soud said his career to date has been a series of “beautiful coincidence[s].” He voted for the first time in 2019, and was subsequently invited to join Alghabra’s riding-level youth council, which led to his internship, and later his job. The idea of running for office had been in the back of his mind for a while.

“You don’t necessarily walk into these things assuming it’s going to happen, but you kind of find yourself in positions where you realize it’s possible,” said Al Soud.

While born in Montreal, Al Soud lived on the boundary between Mississauga Centre and Mississauga–Erin Mills while studying at UTM. After Alghabra announced he wouldn’t seek re-election in 2023, Al Soud said he “started really thinking about the future of the riding.” After many conversations with people in the constituency and beyond, he decided to put his name forward.

Al Soud offered lots of praise for his campaign team, which included a number of his former colleagues, among them Riya Khanna, who had worked alongside him as an outreach adviser in the PMO; Piraveenth Srekanthen; and Erika McCallion, an experienced Liberal organizer and granddaughter of Mississauga’s longtime former mayor, the late Hazel McCallion, who together co-managed Al Soud’s campaign. Also lending a hand were former cabinet colleagues Waleed Saleem, Varisha Naeem, Salam Samara, and Hadeel Aziz, among others.

“It’s a very, very interesting dynamic, and an interesting change,” said Al Soud of finding himself on the other side of the desk. “The most interesting part is the expectations placed on the candidate,” which is a lot more about connecting with people and hitting the pavement, rather than planning in political backrooms, he said. “It was a very welcome shift, but also one that felt a bit strange at times.”

Al Soud said as an MP, he wants to maintain a strong presence in his riding—and continue sharing his personal number with “everyone” he meets.

“I want them to get tired of seeing me at events,” he said.

Speaking to *The Hill Times* between May 9 and 14, Dandurand, Al Soud, and Jackson all said they had yet to be assigned Hill offices, and of the three, only Jackson said he’d decided on staff—bringing on two of his recent provincial-level riding staff, and keeping on one of Maguire’s former aides—at the time of the interview. All three had also yet to be officially sworn in.

“Political staff are so critical to the function of this place … I learned so much during my time [here], and now I’m privileged to be back here in this role and look forward to continuing to do good work on behalf of the people of Brandon-Souris,” said Jackson.

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