

# THE HILL TIMES

## Meet Jack Siegel, the guy who led Grits' green-light committee, and why he favours preferential ballot electoral system

When Jack Siegel is asked if he would consider running for office or becoming a full-time political staffer, he says, 'I don't get enough time with my kid now.'



Jack Siegel, pictured at the Duke of Richmond bar in Toronto with then-prime ministerial candidate Justin Trudeau during the election campaign last year. Mr. Siegel was chair of the Liberals' powerful green-light committee, which was in charge of approving candidates to run for the party. *Photograph courtesy of Jack Siegel*

**By DEREK ABMA**

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Jack Siegel's been a lawyer for more than 30 years and involved in politics for even longer. He was also the guy who oversaw the Liberals' powerful green-light committee in the last federal election and the one who decided who got to run as Liberal candidates.

Mr. Siegel, 58, was born and raised in Toronto, where he continues to live and practise law for Blaney McMurtry LLP. His two law specialties are employment and electoral matters. Asked about connections between these two niche areas, he said in an interview: "Politicians hire and fire people, so there's employment issues that arise in the political world. Part of how I got my start doing some of the political work was doing employment matters for the Ontario Liberal caucus."

A recent legal case that he was involved in was representing Liberal MP Amarjeet Sohi (Edmonton Mill Woods, Alta.) in a recount after winning by a narrow margin in last year's federal election over Conservative incumbent Tim Uppal. Mr. Sohi, who is now infrastructure minister, remained the victor after the recount.

Mr. Siegel is currently representing David Smith, a trustee with the Toronto District School Board, who's been accused of breaking campaign finance rules in the 2014 election.

Mr. Siegel's first involvement in politics was the Ontario election of 1971. Then in junior high school, he volunteered for the campaign of Philip Givens, the Liberal candidate for the riding of York-Forest Hill. Mr. Givens, who was previously Toronto mayor and a federal MP, won his seat that year, though Liberal leader Robert Nixon lost the premier's contest to Progressive Conservative Bill Davis.

Some of the roles Mr. Siegel has taken on politically over the years include being general counsel for the election campaigns of former Liberal Ontario premier Dalton McGuinty in 2003 and 2011, and Kathleen Wynne, the current premier, in 2014. He represents the Liberals on an advisory committee to Ontario's chief electoral officer, and has previously served in a similar capacity federally. He has been the federal Liberal Party's senior national legal counsel for each election campaign since 2000.

He recently chaired what was known as "the green-light committee" for the federal Liberals, the approval body for those seeking to run for seats under the Liberal banner.

Mr. Siegel's work started with the committee in 2013 as the Liberals fielded candidates for three byelections, including the one that saw Chrystia Freeland (University-Rosedale), who is now international trade minister, win a seat in Toronto Centre.

Mr. Siegel became chair of the Liberals' green-light committee in 2014 to help get the field of candidates ready for the 2015 election. He explained that, as head of this committee, one of the aspects he and his team were looking for was philosophical compatibility with Liberal policies. That included things such as being pro-choice on abortion rights, favouring gay-marriage rights, and being supportive of documents such as the Clarity Act and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Potential candidates' past behaviour was also assessed. As for what might disqualify someone, Mr. Siegel gave an example, which predated his involvement with the committee, of a would-be candidate who had multiple convictions for employment-insurance fraud. He described the situation as "some kind of a scheme involving putting people onto the payroll of a non-operating company, issuing records of employment to them, and sharing the proceeds [of employment insurance benefits]."

He added that past convictions and charges are not always deal-breakers when it comes running for the Liberals.

"Everything requires, kind of, a review in context," he said. "If someone has a criminal record 20, 30 years in the past, it might be that their conduct since leads us to conclude that's not an impediment to a candidacy. That has happened."

Mr. Siegel said candidates are checked through online searches, inspections of their social media accounts, police checks, and credit checks. He added that candidates are required to provide full disclosure on details of their lives that could be used against them in a campaign.

"If we're going to have as a candidate the person with a prior criminal record, the campaign needs to have an understanding of the person's background and not get surprised by a brown envelope going to somebody in the campaign," he said.

Even personal details, such aspects of one's marriage history, must be disclosed, Mr. Siegel noted.

"It's part of the questionnaire they fill out," he said. "I can't recall it ever, in and of itself, becoming a conversation. Deadbeat-dad status in a divorce could be an issue, perhaps."

Mr. Siegel said the Liberals' green-light committee was disbanded after changes in the Liberal constitution passed in May. Asked if he's willing to head a similar committee ahead of the next election, he said: "Can't say I'd be interested in doing it for the next election. You never know. I've been talked into things before."

He seemed similarly reluctant when asked about the possibility of becoming more involved in politics, in the sense of running for public office or becoming a full-time political staffer of some sort.

"I never say never, but I don't see that as overwhelmingly likely at this stage in life," he said, citing his 12-year-old son and the implications a full-time political life would have on his work-life balance.

"A provincial seat opened up not far from home a number of years ago for a byelection," he said. "I looked up at the kid, and instead of looking at this and saying, 'Hey, maybe I should take a shot at this,' I passed the newspaper to my wife and said, 'Oh look, Michael Bryant resigned.' I don't get enough time with my kid now."

Asked what drew him to Liberal Party, Mr. Siegel recalled his experience being a page in the Ontario legislature at the age of 12.

“I found the Conservatives of the day, as you can find Conservatives of today, to be less interested in the well-being of people who are not doing well economically,” he said. “The NDP were speaking up for these people but not dealing with any of the practical arguments that the Conservatives were raising. And the Liberals were trying to balance interests.”

He said this same reasoning, fundamentally, is what keeps him a Liberal today, along with the socially progressive positions they’ve adopted over the years on gay rights and abortion.



*S. Andrada*  
Jack Siegel with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at the Liberal convention in May. Photograph by Sheila Andrada courtesy of Jack Siegel

With Mr. Siegel’s background in electoral law, one might expect him to somehow get involved in the ongoing process of federal electoral reform, though he said he hasn’t been asked to be part of it in any official capacity yet.

“I may or may not, as opportunities to speak publicly on the matter arise, take advantage of that opportunity,” he said.

Liberal MP Greg Fergus (Hull-Aylmer, Que.), who has known Mr. Siegel since 1989, said he hopes Mr. Siegel’s knowledge is somehow tapped as the government embarks on its electoral-reform process.

“He is, was, and remains the foremost election law expert in this country,” Mr. Fergus said. “This developed over time. Almost 30 years go now, when we first met, Jack was the go-to guy for resolving disputes at meetings or chairing meetings, because he knows



the rules and he knows the election law.”



*Liberal MP Greg Fergus calls Jack Siegel the top electoral law expert in the country. The Hill Times photograph by Jake Wright*

Mr. Fergus added that Mr. Siegel has “an outstanding sense of humour” and a friendly disposition, which helps him get people onside when he’s in a position of leadership.

“Some people can chair meetings or know the rules, and they let you know that they know the rules and lord it over you. Not Jack,” he said.

“Jack, he truly is a fun guy to be around. He has opinions, but he gets along with everyone because of his solid knowledge.”

Mr. Siegel said he has an “inclination” toward an electoral system that would involve ranked preferential ballots, adding that he’s also open to something that could incorporate a degree of proportional representation.

In support of preferential ballots, he noted that it’s the format the Liberal Party has used to select leaders since the early 1990s.

“What it does within the party, and what I could only hope that it would do in the body politic, is it promotes consensus,” he said. “As we walk out of our nomination meetings—where on the first tally of the preferential ballot nobody got over 30 per cent—with a choice that got some level of preference from over 50 per cent, there’s a coming together. It moderates bad behaviour [from candidates] because people want second-choice support, so scorched-earth does not work.

“I think it’s an approach to elections that, not only produces a more fair result, but improves the level of both the behaviour of the candidates/politicians and the attitudes of the electorate. There’s greater buy-in to whoever succeeds.”

While Liberal opponents charge that a preferential-ballot system would favour the Liberals, who might seem the logical second choice of both Conservative and NDP supporters, Mr. Siegel said: “I don’t think historical polling data bears that out. I think current polling data might, but current polling data has [the Liberals] as the first choice of pretty close to a majority to begin with.”

He said the Liberals likely would not have benefitted from a preferential-ballot system 10 years ago.

“To say that at the moment it favours a particular party’s interests is hardly an indictment of the entire model. Every model’s going to favour somebody at a given time,” he said.

Mr. Siegel added that a new electoral system should “not necessarily” be put to a referendum. For one thing, he said it would be an ironic predicament if at least two different choices for a new voting system, along with the choice of remaining with the first-past-the-post system, were included in a referendum question and no option got more than 50 per cent.

If one particular option for reform was presented in a referendum, he said it would face “an internal bias” because the no vote would consist of both those who favour the status quo and those who wanted a different alternative.

Mr. Siegel said a more legitimate way to put this issue to a direct vote would be to have two referendums. One would be on whether to keep the first-past-the-post system, which he believes would result in “a rejection of the status quo, overwhelmingly.” A second vote would be on what particular alternative to adopt. However, he said having two referendums would be impractical because of cost.

“I think that where an election was carried out where change was plainly in the platform of the successful party, that it is quite reasonable for that party to proceed with a change agenda and work toward generating a broader consensus on the model without requiring people to go back to the ballot box,” he said.

[dabma@hilltimes.com](mailto:dabma@hilltimes.com)

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Derek Abma is deputy editor of The Hill Times. can be reached at [dabma@hilltimes.com](mailto:dabma@hilltimes.com). Follow on Twitter at @derekabma.