

Envoy's appointment on hold

'Glitches' delay posting of Ottawa journalist as consul-general to office in Punjab

BY JANE TABER, OTTAWA

Bhupinder S. Liddar, who was appointed five months ago by former prime minister Jean Chrétien as consul-general to Chandigarh, India, was told last week by the Paul Martin government that his appointment is on hold because of "glitches."

And that's all Mr. Liddar, 56, well known as a journalist in Ottawa covering the diplomatic circuit, says he has been told although he hears it may involve security concerns.

His friend, former senior Chrétien cabinet minister Herb Dhaliwal, who was instrumental in Mr. Liddar's appointment to India and who is a privy councillor, has not been able to find out about the so-called glitches.

Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham isn't saying much either, allowing only that there are "some unresolved issues in respect to Mr. Liddar's appointment."

"This is the strangest thing," Mr. Liddar said in an interview yesterday. "It's crazy."

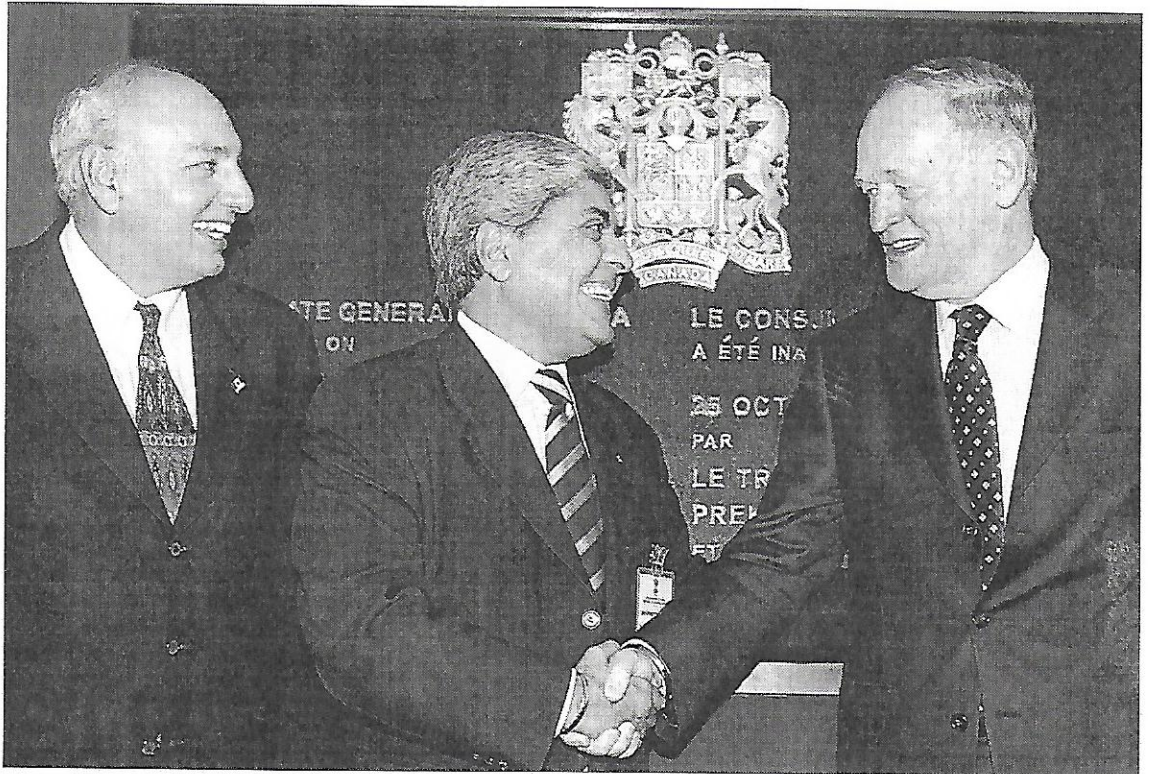
Mr. Liddar has hired a lawyer and is appealing the decision to the Security Intelligence Review Committee, the watchdog agency of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

He remains on the Foreign Affairs payroll, earning between \$108,100 and \$127,000. No replacement has been named for his position; it remains open pending Mr. Liddar's appeals.

"At this stage I don't know anything," Mr. Liddar said. "I hear there were some security concerns ..."

But he cannot confirm that.

He said he was called to the Foreign Affairs department last week and told: "Sorry, we have received information and therefore, we'll



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Former prime minister Jean Chrétien appointed Bhupinder S. Liddar as consul-general in Chandigarh, India. The move was supported by then-Natural-Resources-Minister, Herb Dhaliwal, left.

drop it at that."

His lawyer, Janice Payne, said that she believes Mr. Liddar has a good case to sue for damages if the issue does not get resolved before the review committee.

She said her client has not received anything in writing and, to the best of her knowledge, the issue is related to security concerns.

Mr. Liddar was appointed to the position last October.

Over the past few months he has prepared for his new job by selling his magazine that covered the diplomatic circuit in Ottawa, and dropping both his television show on the diplomatic community and a newsletter on the subject.

Through November and December he attended briefings by Foreign Affairs on issues related to his new job. He was hoping to arrive in India by April 1.

"I have covered the diplomatic circuit but I've never known anything of this to happen," he said. "Maybe a week later you may hear

something or two weeks — but five months?"

He said there is nothing in his past that would jeopardize the appointment.

"I mean you talk to these people [diplomats], you intermingle socially and otherwise," he said. "I think the onus is on them [the government] to tell us what the problem is. I have no qualms. I think we should know."

Mr. Liddar, who is Sikh and was born in Kenya, is well known around official Ottawa, attending all the galas, parties and diplomatic cocktail events.

According to *Official Secrets*, a 1990 book about CSIS, the intelligence service had a file on Mr. Liddar dating back to the mid-1980s, when he worked to open up "better relations" between Canada and the Soviets on behalf of a Tory MP.

Although Mr. Liddar was said to be opening this dialogue in an official capacity, the job was said to have led to a dubious CSIS decision

to spike his application for Canadian citizenship.

Mr. Liddar would eventually get his citizenship.

However, it's unknown whether the concerns dating back to the mid-1980s, or more recent ones, would have cost him his consul-general job in India.

He was most recently in the news for attending the Liberal Party convention that saw Mr. Martin become the new leader.

He ran into a bit of trouble for attending the partisan event because, as a diplomat, he is supposed to remain neutral.

Mr. Dhaliwal, who pushed for the controversial consulate in the Punjab, is concerned about Mr. Liddar's predicament.

"It's totally incredible, unbelievable that this could happen," said Mr. Dhaliwal, who was dropped from cabinet when Mr. Martin became Prime Minister.

With a report from Colin Freeze