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News / Toronto

## Latest councillor a reminder of lack of diversity on city council

Neethan Shan is the first Tamil-Canadian to be elected on Toronto city council.

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Neethan Shan will represent Ward 42, Scarborough-Rouge River at City Council, an office that's still light years behind when it comes to representing the city's diversity.

By: **Gilbert Ngabo** Metro Published on Thu Feb 16 2017

When Neethan Shan first met his colleagues on Wednesday, he would see that the makeup of city council doesn't reflect the city it represents.

Although nearly 50 per cent of Torontonians are racialized minorities, Toronto doesn't see that diversity in its elected officials. Shan, who replaced former city councillor Raymond Cho in Monday's by-election, is one of only six councillors who hail from visible minority communities. Toronto has 44 councillors.

"That's a really low percentage. And there's only one racialized woman in that council," said the Ryerson Diversity Institute's director Wendy Cukier.

Toronto is worse off than both the provincial and federal representation on diversity. Seven of 23 MPs hailing from the Toronto area are from minority groups, while it's six out of 24 at Queen's Park, says Cukier.

Even if municipal representation is a result of democratic elections, Cukier said those numbers warrant further exploration as to why there's such disparity in local politics. The importance of diversity in leadership cannot be downplayed, she said.

"It plays a role in shaping the aspirations of young people and signaling who belongs and who doesn't, as well as providing multiple perspectives on policy issues," she noted.

Shan moved to Canada as a 16-year-old refugee from Sri Lanka. He's the first Tamil-Canadian to be elected on Toronto city council, and focused his campaign on equity and infrastructure issues.

His victory is seen as a source of inspiration for the Tamil-Canadian

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community.

"It is exciting especially for young people in our community, who will look up to him and see what is possible in this country," said David Poopalpillai, a spokesperson for the Canadian Tamil Congress.

"We all hope he does well not just for our community but for everyone in his ward."

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