

The Macleans.ca Interview: Elizabeth May

The Green party leader on playing nice with Liberals, her problems with NAFTA and why she'd be a better MP than Peter MacKay

Philippe Gohier, Macleans.ca | Jun 7, 2007 | 18:54:08

Macleans.ca: Are you confident heading into a national campaign at any given moment, or are you angling for a specific time?

Elizabeth May: Right now, we feel that the Green party is the only party in Canada that clearly has momentum. We are bolstered by new indications of support from people across Canada and the PEI election results are very encouraging.

I'd prefer to have an election sooner than later because I think that Canadians should have the chance to ensure we don't have Stephen Harper as prime minister for a minute longer than we already have. On the other hand, the longer we have to prepare for the next election, the stronger we'll be, the more effective we'll be.

M: What would you consider a successful election result for your party?

EM: Well, there's a range of success in our expectations - from a few seats to majority government. My own sense is that I'd be very, very happy to see us have enough seats to form official party status, which would mean at least 12 seats. That would be a very good and strong result.

My goal is to ensure that we have enough seats that we can influence a government's agenda and move forward the kind of programs and policies we care about regardless of who's in power.

Obviously, we think that the chances of achieving positive policies expand enormously if we're dealing with a Prime Minister Stéphane Dion and not a Prime Minister Stephen Harper. But we'll work with who's there and if enough Greens are elected, we'll be able to really accomplish an enormous amount for Canadians - along the model, really, of what Tommy Douglas was able to do.

M: What do you see the Greens being able to offer a Liberal government?

EM: Obviously, achieving progress on climate change is a shared agenda. That, to me, is paramount. Beyond the climate issue, there will be differences in policy between the Greens and the Liberals. But I don't have any trouble imagining that I'll be able to accomplish more by advocating for Atlantic Canada than, say, the current MP from here, Peter MacKay.

Stephen Harper and the Conservatives clearly have an antipathy towards Atlantic Canada. They have a negative view of Atlantic Canadians and it's shown itself very clearly in the last budget with the quite extraordinary and diabolical choice - if you can call it a choice - that Mr. Harper has put to both Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia over what they thought they'd gained fair and square through negotiations on the Atlantic Accord.

Nearly \$800-million went to Quebec in the federal budget and not a penny to Nova Scotia - and we're suffering here from much higher and persistent unemployment. Looking at the issues that face this area - high unemployment, reduced government services, schools that desperately need re-investments, a health-care system that needs re-investments - for it to be deprived of equalization payment improvements when money flowed all over the country elsewhere is such a slap in the face.

M: Do you see Atlantic Canada emerging as a political base for the Green party?

EM: I think we're very strong in other regions as well. As a matter of fact, this has been an area where historically we've been the least strong.

But we're not in need of a regional base like the Reform Party or the Bloc Québécois. We're speaking to things that appeal to Canadians right across the country.

M: With respect to Central Nova, you've chosen what would appear to be a difficult riding to win. At the same time, you've also dismissed Peter MacKay as just a "yes man" for Stephen Harper...

EM: Everybody in his cabinet... If there were any people that gave Stephen Harper a hard time, they'd be gone. That's very, very clear.

M: But if he's just a "yes man," then why go to such lengths to defeat him?

EM: Well, it's one less seat for Stephen Harper. The other point is that when your hometown candidate is in the front benches, that used to translate into power and influence - not just for the member, but for the riding as well. That's no longer true - not in Stephen Harper's government. So the question isn't "why choose to defeat Peter MacKay?" but "why bother electing someone who can do nothing for you?"

M: Does that mean you'd expect a cabinet post in a Liberal government?

EM: I'm not expecting anything of the sort. But to the extent that I have any expectations, it's that we can work together constructively. And that will include that I want to see a national strategy for rail because it's a great way to reduce greenhouse gases and we need to provide better rail service to Canadians who would like to be able to take a train between Saskatoon and Regina, or between Edmonton and Calgary.

This is one example of Green priorities: that we should have more goods running on rails that are safe, that are properly regulated and more people who choose to do so as well. If we do that, then in terms of my riding, we wouldn't be losing all those rail jobs [from the closure of Trenton Car Works].

M: Does the Green Party consider the Kyoto Protocol dead?

EM: No, absolutely not. It's a global instrument and a country like Canada can make a difference. We can strive to meet our Kyoto targets. It's critical that we do so. There's quite a lot of time before 2012.

M: But isn't there a point at which it becomes impossible to meet the targets?

EM: At this point, it will be difficult to reach the Kyoto targets. I'm not prepared to say they can't be reached - we don't know that. But even if it does become evident that we can't meet our Kyoto targets domestically or with international credits because we've just wasted too much time, that doesn't mean the Kyoto Protocol is no longer relevant or that we don't have an obligation to come as close as we possibly can.

If we don't rapidly commit ourselves to emissions reductions, we're going to be significantly hampered when further emissions reductions targets are negotiated and Canada has to pull its weight post-2012. This issue does not end in 2012. And that's why failure is just not an option.

M: What kind of role can Canada play in getting the U.S. onside with global climate change policy?

EM: Clearly, Canada's role right now is extremely unhelpful and is essentially that of a global saboteur. To say we're not prepared to reach Kyoto targets because we think it will bring about economic ruin is sending the opposite message from what global leaders have already concluded everywhere except in the U.S. and Australia.

M: You've called for Canada to withdraw from NAFTA. Doesn't that threaten to mine cooperation between the U.S. and Canada on climate change?

EM: The reason that we need to re-negotiate NAFTA relates to the sections that have not been shown to be in Canada's best interests - the Chapter 11 provisions around investor protection which have hobbled our ability to regulate toxic chemicals, for example, and the energy chapter, where we have to always sell the highest proportion of the amount of energy we produce to the United States forever.

Our first attempt would be to re-negotiate those sections. But if those negotiations weren't working and we gave the six months' notice to get out of NAFTA, I think they would start moving quite quickly.

We want extremely strong, friendly, cooperative trade relations with the United States. We just think the NAFTA agreement was framed around some of the wrong principles. Agreements like European Union trade model enhanced environment protection and enhanced workers' rights. There's no reason why NAFTA couldn't have been designed to do the same.

The U.S. is coming onside with our climate change policy in any event. The difficulty is that George Bush won't. So the rest of the western world decided we're gonna move ahead and make Kyoto work without the United States.

M: Last year, you made some comments on abortion that attracted attention - namely that you would never have an abortion, "not in a million years," and that "nobody in their right mind is for abortions." Is there a conflict between you and your party on this?

EM: The party has the same position. The party's position is called "pro-life, pro-choice." What we're saying as a party, and what I'm saying as an individual leader, is that any civilized society must provide safe legal access to any woman who needs or wants an abortion. But it's not something someone is *for*, in the same way that no one is *for* chemotherapy. I think Bill Clinton probably said it best - we'd like a society where abortions are safe and legal and rare.

I would never change a thing about the current abortion laws; we must have them. All I was trying to say was that abortion is never viewed by anyone as a societal good. Access to legal and safe abortions, yes. But being in favour of having a legal right to a safe abortion doesn't mean you are "pro-abortion." I gave a very long, nuanced answer to a group of Roman catholic nuns and it was distorted by people over e-mail and websites and that's just the way it is to be a politician.

M: It seems that when political parties first rise to prominence, they struggle with delivering nuanced statements. At least, that was the case with the ADQ in Quebec and Reform elsewhere.

EM: I don't know that the ADQ or Reform has *ever* delivered a nuanced position. I believe that it's important to address complex social problems without insisting there's an easy answer when there isn't.

M: But is managing communications and policy for such a rapidly growing national organization proving to be a bit of a challenge?

EM: Well, we're not going to micro-manage. Our decision-making is still a grassroots structure.

That being said, with the increased realization that we will be electing MPs in the next election comes – and I think, quite appropriately – greater scrutiny as to what we stand for, what our positions are and who our candidates are. Of course, for those parties who are frightened of our rise in popularity, there will be efforts to distort what we say and to distort our positions and misrepresent our views - those are things we should expect. Our candidates have to be put through a review to ensure there's nothing there that's going to blow up in the middle of an election campaign.

M: Do you feel like the party is ready for prime-time?

EM: Absolutely. That's absolutely what we're saying. It would be fabulous if I could imagine that enough people will vote Green that we'd actually form government. But I think that, realistically, we'll have enough MPs in the House of Commons that the role of the Greens will be an extremely positive and helpful one.

M: Your attempts to work with the NDP and the Liberals seem to suggest there might be room for greater cooperation between parties on the left. Is that a fair assessment?

EM: Not really. If there was a Conservative party left, we'd want to work with them. If you think about the kinds of positions and policies advanced by someone like the late Dalton Camp, or the kind of fiscal conservatism and social caring of someone like Robert Stanfield, those simply don't fall into line at all with where the Harper government is coming from.

The problem is that the party that represents the biggest threat to the things we care most about is the current Conservative party and the current prime minister. That's not to say we wouldn't reach out to particularly progressive Conservatives across Canada who, like many of our existing members, find themselves homeless. It's an accident of our historical time that Canada finds itself without a responsible, traditional small-c conservative party.

We really don't believe that the Green party fits in that outmoded left versus right spectrum because all the older parties talk about how economic growth is their goal. The Green party fundamentally believes that what we have to do now is shift from a never-ending growth model to an enhanced development model that allows us to invest in healthy communities and to have economic activity which is sustainable. We're moving away from the automatic assumption that unlimited economic growth is a good thing.

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