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Elizabeth May: Green Party candidate for Saanich–Gulf Islands?

Elizabeth May, Leader of the Green Party of Canada, stepped off the plane in Vancouver with a pack of special buns and icing for her grandchildren, given to her enroute by an man in Thunder Bay. She was in Vancouver to attend a Chan Centre memorial for Jim Fulton, legend of the coast and larger-than-life executive director of the David Suzuki Foundation. In the hour available, *Island Tides'* Christa Grace-Warrick interviewed Elizabeth at the airport's Milestones Restaurant, amid the lunchtime buzz.

Christa Grace-Warrick: Rumour has it that you were recently asked, on Salt Spring Island, whether you would stand as federal Green Party of Canada candidate for Saanich-Gulf Islands in the next election? How did you respond?

Elizabeth May: It was a marvellous moment. I was signing books, suddenly someone in the line-up said, 'You should run here.' I said, 'Well, actually, I'm thinking about it.' Then the one voice turned into a chorus.

I am thinking about it quite seriously—weighing options. In politics things change dramatically and you never really know when an election is going to happen. Or would a by-election come up first?—that would change everything.

Christa G-W: How would you answer any criticism regarding 'parachuting' into Saanich-Gulf Islands?

Elizabeth M: Well, of course, I *have* been very reluctant to run anywhere that wasn't a home-base, like Nova Scotia is. Now, when I ran last time in Central Nova, I staged a high-profile campaign against Peter MacKay and, I promise you, I had every intention of getting elected.

Every single day people come up to me and say, 'We need you in the House of Commons, please run where you can get elected. It's an extraordinary thing. Apart from the buns in Thunder Bay, it happened again this morning, changing planes in Toronto. Someone came up to me and said, 'You've got to run where you can win.'

And I'd have to share with everyone involved, regardless if it's Saanich-Gulf Islands or another riding that becomes the choice of the party, that there's has been an evolution in my thinking—that I really owe it to the million people who voted Green in 2008 to be their voice in the House of Commons.

I'm not going to be immune from the criticism of being a parachute candidate. It's a fair point. I think it's much better to run in a place where you have lived for a long time.

The issue is how do we get a Green voice in the house of Commons? Not to split hairs, as leader of a national party, I'm in a slightly different category. I do need to be in the House of Commons. There is a history—where national leaders without a seat seek out a place where there is a good prospect and get elected—on Vancouver Island, Sir John A MacDonald and Tommy Douglas.

I'm going to have to be upfront about it and say, 'This riding is where I believe voters are prepared to make history; voters are prepared to break some of the old moulds; to say to the country, 'We did it here first'—that kind of spirit and momentum. That should explain for people the new-found attachment.

That said, if I am lucky enough to represent Saanich–Gulf Islands, there's barely a more beautiful place in the world. You could never call it a sacrifice—it's just distance from my Dad, who's 84, that sort of thing. But distance can be overcome and lots of people are not lucky enough to be living next door to their parents, so that's just how it is.

In the last election the Green Party's focus was to do better everywhere. In the party—it's not a bunch of backroom boys, it's a grass roots party, it's a federally elected council and campaign committee—the decision has been made that in the next election campaign our top priority is to target, focus, and win a seat for the Leader in the House of Commons and then, from there, other changes can come in other years.

The party wants to find the greenest riding. Not that it has the highest number of Green Party members—but the riding that has the highest commitment overall to the *values* of the Greens. It wouldn't be just based in previous voting results because, based on previous voting results, my riding in Central Nova was the best result for Greens in any first-past-the post country anywhere in the world; we had 32% of the vote. That's why we have been polling certain ridings.

In the next election we need a parliamentary breakthrough. There's likely be another minority government regardless of

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whether it's a minority with Michael Ignatieff as prime minister or a minority with Stephen Harper as prime minister. Greens would represent: a better way to handle the recession, a quicker path to more jobs, responsibility to future generations through action on the climate crisis—all of those things.

And not only that, the way in which we raise the issues would be different; more respectful and focussed on the issues. My role in the House of Commons, among others, will be to improve decorum, to tone down the aggressive partisanship, the bellicose blustering, and be respectful and get people on all sides of the house to work together.

And, of course, the climate change crisis looms large in my mind. We can't afford to keep going along as though decisions about whether our children survive can be put off to another day.

Christa G-W: Central Nova has a suburban-rural split. Saanich-Gulf Islands has a suburban-rural split plus a split between a high development area and one under a 'preserve and protect' mandate? How do you feel you could unite the riding?

Elizabeth M: Central Nova is actually quite similar to Saanich-Gulf Islands communities: dependence on fisheries, a lot of seasonal employment, very little heavy industry. What I look at in uniting an area and what appeals to me—and there are a couple of the other ridings we are looking at that are also primarily rural—is that the perspective of people outside major urban areas is getting lost in some of the other parties. Other party leaders are all from urban centres: Stephen Harper is from Calgary, Michael Ignatieff is Toronto, Jack Layton is Toronto, Gilles Duceppe, of course, is Montreal.

That said, there are common values that unite all of Canada. There's not that much difference between downtown Toronto and Cape Breton Island—to me there's some common values that transcend the cultural differences which are obvious. We don't pay enough attention to that. We have allowed the politics of division to triumph too long in this country. We have got to maintain that we are one Canada and as Canadian we have more in common than our differences.

That said, in a microcosm like Saanich Gulf-Islands, suburban issues are going to be different—Saanich faces different local concerns than Saturna. But if you are looking at what kind of policies will be of assistance to people, it doesn't matter if you're on an island or in a suburb. If you happen to be a married couple and you happen to be paying too much tax, because Canada insists on this foolish policy of overtaxing married couples, you see, 'Well gee, the Green Party actually wants to allow us to just pay taxes on what we're earning.' Right now the Harper government is allowing certain kinds of pension income splitting for retirees. That's not good enough.

There are solutions that one might pursue at the federal level that reflect the values that Canadians hold, regardless of where they are. These values I see as concern for community

and concern for the health and well-being of the whole. We are losing it bit-by-bit but we have not yet been completely absorbed by the mantra of 'every man for himself'—that is not the Canadian ethic or identity. We are much more focussed on: 'We need to do the best we can for all of us, all the time.'

What I'd like to do as an MP is what I did in Central Nova: hold community townhall meetings, talk about local issues, and what people would like government to do for them. You'd better be responsive to people who vote for you and elected you or you have abandoned the basic tenets of democracy.

Christa: Voting patterns in Saanich-Gulf Islands are not as entrenched as in Central Nova. How could you use that to advantage?

Elizabeth: One of the things that defines a community where you have people come in from 'away' is that people are not necessarily as entrenched. They are more fluid in their voting. The fact that people are open-minded in Saanich-Gulf Islands is certainly an advantage.

Obviously to win in any riding across Canada I have to convince a lot more voters than have ever voted Green before that this is the sensible thing to do, that this will advance their interests as a community, advance the interests of the planet, give them better representation in Ottawa because they have someone who has a voice that can be used rather than stifled. Having the leader of a party as your MP is a liberating thing, especially if you have someone who is responsive and wants to take your voice forward.

Christa: We currently have two ministers (federal and provincial) representing us—at least in North Saanich and the southern Gulf Islands. Many feel that the riding needs someone who can represent it, rather than representing government to us. As a party leader would you be able to do that?

Elizabeth: That's very well put. Yes, entirely. That is my role in public life. Of course, I came into public life because of my deep concern particularly around the climate crisis but I am not, neither is the Green Party, one-dimensional or one issue. There are a lot of things to care about. I'd stack up our policies on social justice and eliminating poverty, our policies of advocacy for seniors and pensions, with any other party—and we're better.

But beyond that, it's being able to say, 'What issues do you want to raise in the House of Commons?' In my new book, *Losing Confidence*, I talk about the dangerous process of partisanship overtaking policy and principle and that partisanship is entrenched due to the increasing powers of political masters. So regardless, whether we are talking about Gary Lunn or someone else representing a different party, someone who's in one of the larger political parties, other than the leader, never gets to say what they think, just never! And I'm not constrained by that, not just because I'm the leader of the Greens but because the Green Party believes that MPs

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should represent the people from their constituency.

Christa: Typically in voting, Saanich–Gulf Islands has a split vote between Liberal, NDP and Green Party which allows a Tory minority to carry the day. Given that voters are prepared to shift their party vote for a strong candidate (Briony Penn’s Liberal candidacy in the last election), what would you do?

Elizabeth: The interesting thing about the Greens is that we really aren’t a left-wing or right-wing party. Our solutions are so common sense that we appeal to people across the old line parties.

I’m jumping into it, but just let’s talk hypothetically about Saanich–Gulf Islands. I would need to convince voters that I was the best possible candidate. It matters; a lot of politics these days has lost track of the fact that our parliamentary system is about electing a member of parliament, we don’t directly vote for the prime minister.

But in any case, voting for the leader of a political party other than the one that has been holding the seat for a while will take a leap of faith on the part of the voting public and I need to persuade people that I’ll be the best MP they have ever had.

Beyond that, for those who would like to see a replacement in Ottawa, I need to persuade people, who were drawn to Briony’s campaign for instance, that this is actually the unique opportunity that leads to defeating the incumbent. And that takes a lot of people prepared to say, ‘Alright I’ll switch my usual voting patterns, just this once to see how it works out.’ And if I can get that kind of commitment from people, I don’t need people ripping up their membership cards in other parties.

That’s what happened in Central Nova. In 2006, the Greens had about 2% of the vote there and we went to 32%. Not all those people joined the Green Party, they just decided that I was the best choice for their MP. We got support from NDP, Liberals and traditional Conservatives.

Christa: Will you be seeking endorsements from locals? If so, who?

Elizabeth: Yes ... and... everybody! I need to appeal to people outside the ‘usual suspects’—as we say in Casablanca—and the more that they are publicly willing to say so and call on their friends and neighbours, well, that makes the case. That is what we did quite successfully in the London by-election, which I almost won. I will absolutely be asking lots of people for help—as I’m asking them now for advice in this process of deciding where I should run.

Christa: We have spent a good deal of time talking about your candidacy and I’d like to finish with a few briefer comments on policy.

The Green Party platform includes several items to strengthen small communities and their economies: farmers’ markets, local venture capital initiatives, family farms and their transition to organic, and local

fisheries management. Which of these would you push for as an MP?

Elizabeth: All of them! Local solutions are linked. Community wellbeing is not confined to one issue. A federal food policy increases the ability to create a local food policy such as community processing plants, locally adapted food safety in what I call ‘foodcrafting’, and things like mandating shelf space in supermarkets for local foods.

In the same way, water security and mass transit (ferries) are federal policy issues as well. And we can bring them down to ground as local quality of life issues.

Christa: Two big federally-controlled issues on the coast are the introduction of tanker traffic and the management of fish farms. As someone who has witnessed the disasters of pollution and the collapse of a fishery, what are your thoughts and what could you do?

Elizabeth: The tanker moratorium must be maintained, the risks of an oil spill on the coast are off the charts. With fish farms, what we’ve allowed to happen is the privatization of a common property resource which has multiple ecological services. The federal government needs to take a stronger role. The risks to the wild fisheries and the ecosystem are just too high. Make aquaculture more like agriculture and do it on land and do it further inland—it’s still profitable.

Christa: Canadians are concerned about the militarization of our international role. What would you say about this in Parliament?

Elizabeth: The search for peace and a culture of non-violence is one of our core values. In our foundation document *Vision Green*, on our website, we detail how Canada—the country that developed peacekeeping, where Lester Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize for the resolution of the Suez Crisis—is now one of the least participatory nations on Earth in UN peacekeeping missions. In fact just about a year ago now we were asked to send four people from our military to assist the Congo Republic and we declined, we didn’t have four people to spare with the skills they wanted.

It’s devastating! There is a genocide in progress, they need our help in Congo, in Darfur.

Many people confuse our role in NATO with peacekeeping. Our mission in Afghanistan is not a UN mission. The UN has not ruled it is illegal but it is not a UN mission by any means.

We are seen increasingly as an aggressive force as opposed to peacekeeping. The proper role of our military needs to be decided through the body politic and through democracy.

Christa: The Green Party of Canada has played a major role in setting out policy for Canada and having it adopted by other parties. If you are the first Green MP elected in Canada, what further advances would you be able to achieve in a what is likely to be another minority government?

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Elizabeth We are turning old-style politics on its head. The real power lies in those who are outside the mainstream, who can raise different issues, work with everyone, and help find cooperative solutions. So, being a Green in a minority government, there will be tremendous scope to influence decisions, to be of assistance, to raise issues that others aren't raising, and—going back to your point—we're happy when others take our ideas. There's a lot of serious problems that the country faces for which the solutions exist and, in some ways, the politics get in the way.

Christa: How did the Green Party get to be so imaginative?

Elizabeth: Well you see, imagination and innovation are what happens when you let people put forward the best idea they can think of without worrying about a package of propaganda. I think the reason we are creative is that we're not blinded by ideological strictures, and generations of notions of what belongs in 'our party,' or not. It's a very exciting time to be in the Green Party; we are able to put forward the very best ideas and hold on to our values and listen to people and be grassroots.

Christa: In your latest book, 'Losing Confidence: Power, Politics, And The Crises In Canadian Democracy,' you talk about the level of incivility and the lack of thoughtful debate in the House. You favour discussion, debate and negotiation. In Parliament, what would you do to improve this sad situation?

Elizabeth: I do have a plan. I'm a close observer of Question Period and house committees. I'm lucky, I worked in government from 1986 to 1988, so I know how it used to be. I worked in an era when there was a lot of cooperation. Even in the Mulroney years, working for the Environment Minister in a majority government, there was a lot of cooperation. We made sure that people in the NDP and the Liberals would agree with what we were going to propose before we proposed it.

An ethic of cooperation is fundamental to the Westminster tradition and parliamentary success, especially in forming solutions in a minority government.

The House of Commons is absolutely beautiful—it's meant to inspire, it's meant to quicken the heart. There are vaulted

ceilings; it's layered with carved imagery of Canada. All this iconography is our map of ourselves—a combination of mythic and historical.

In this place of physical beauty designed to exemplify democracy, we have behaviour that would not be acceptable on a schoolground. I watch the Conservative members; their heckling is orchestrated. They test messages that they will later use in attack ads. The heckling of Michael Ignatieff was scripted before the attack ads with the messages we heard later in the ads. So it's not random, it's appalling and we don't have to tolerate it.

As to my personal plan: suppose that I'm the only Green in the House of Commons and I'm surrounded with bullying and abuse. My strategy is to make sure the rules of the House are followed. It is not permitted to interrupt a MP when he or she is speaking, so the hurling of abuse, the booing violates the rules of House of Commons.

My approach would be to have zero-tolerance for heckling. So, when it's my turn to ask a question, if any MPs are yelling or interrupting, I plan to sit down. The Speaker of the House will probably realize that I am having trouble with the amount of noise round me and he'll stand up and call for order. If he doesn't I'll miss my chance to ask a question. If I miss a couple of times, the media is bound to notice that I am practising something called zero-tolerance for heckling.

It's like set of strings, when the Speaker stands up members sit down but that works in reverse, if the member sits down the Speaker will rise—and I think we can bring decorum back to the House.

Elizabeth asks that you let her know your thoughts on her possible candidacy in Saanich-Gulf Islands, email elizabethmay@greenparty.ca. To hear her in person, attend the Green Party constituency AGM on July 9, (see advertisement on page 10). You can also see Elizabeth, at her book signing on Pender Islands on July 7 (see What's On?, page 5).