

Reprint **Island Tides**

Visit www.islandtides.com for more interesting articles on other BC, national & international topics

Reprint from Volume 23 Number 11

June 2, 2011

The greening of Parliament: talking to Elizabeth May, MP

by CHRISTA GRACE-WARRICK

As a 'bookend' interview, I spoke with Elizabeth May on May 4, following her election as MP.

I first met and interviewed her at Vancouver International Airport in June 2009, when she came to throw her hat into the ring for the Saanich-Gulf Islands nomination and to attend the Jim Fulton Memorial at the Chan Centre (Jim is mentioned in this interview).

It has been a momentous 21 months and I have come to admire this extraordinary woman more each day.

Elizabeth May's campaign for election began 18 months ago as soon as she was elected Green Party candidate for Saanich-Gulf Islands. She threw herself into Saanich-Gulf Islands life with gusto, participating in countless events and meeting her neighbours across the riding.

For the key component in her phenomenal election campaign, in which she ousted a 17-year Conservative Minister incumbent, she points to house parties. 'Let's face it,' she says, 'most people won't cross the threshold to a political party meeting but they will have coffee or wine and cheese with their friends and meet and talk to the candidate who is also a guest.' House party meetings, she said, resulted in 100% support.

The morning wave to motorists on the Pat Bay highway was also a winner. Getting back so many hoots, waves and cheers, volunteers were enthused and motivated at the support and good feeling for May.

The campaign did not start out with 2,500 volunteers (700 from Salt Spring); at first it was just a handful. House parties also resulted in building the huge team that knocked on doors and performed many other tasks

throughout the writ period.

May comments, 'Our' volunteers were enthusiastic, committed, positive and so energetic. The power of volunteers is what won the election. I can never thank everyone enough!

Her Constituency

Now that her focus has changed—literally overnight—from working for election to representing her riding, May is motivated by gratitude to those that elected her and, she reminds, a desire to represent everyone in the riding, not only those who voted for her.

As an MP, May's 'number one priority is being the best member of parliament that the citizens of Saanich-Gulf Islands have ever had. Which means a really good constituency presence. I want to augment my parliamentary budget for the constituency with some party funding but clearly the party is going to have a lot less funding than in the past because of the electoral results, so I need to figure out how to make that work.

'I'd like to have a second constituency office on the Gulf Islands somewhere.' Her Sidney campaign office has closed. The constituency office will open soon at 9711-4th Avenue.

May plans to hold 'town hall' meetings in Saanich-Gulf Islands every six weeks to give a 'report back' session and ask what's on people's minds. She says that face-to-face meetings allow her to be as candid as she would like to be. She wants to be constantly in touch with her constituents and will use electronic media and social networking to do so. She will also be writing an Ottawa Report for *Island Tides*.

© Island Tides Publishing Ltd. This article may be reproduced with the following attribution, in its entirety, and notification to Island Tides Publishing Ltd.

'This article was published (June 2, 2011) in 'Island Tides', an independent, regional newspaper distributing across the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria to Nanaimo.'

Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada. Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.
Email: islandtides@islandtides.com. Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>

She hopes that constituents can help develop policy. An antidote to the corruption of power is to share your problems with your constituents, she declares.

Proportional Representation

'I'm devastated by the fact that I'm not in a minority Parliament. I thought there was no way that there could be a Conservative majority. And it will really be tougher to do the things I want to do. I also think it is bad news for the country. This is the most anti-democratic of outcomes and only made possible by the first-past-the-post voting system; in which a party could win 39.6% of a 61% voter turn-out and have such a big majority.'

May will work for proportional representation (pro-rep). She is emphatic that she will do everything in her power to prevent another 'false majority'. 'Sixty percent of Canadians did not vote for the Harper government and they wake up to find they have a majority Conservative government.'

The Liberals, whose numbers were decimated in Parliament even though their share of the popular vote did not drop much, are now likely to lend a sympathetic ear to pro-rep. This, she explains, was exactly the process in New Zealand, when pro-rep followed the similar destruction of a major party. The NDP, she says, has already declared for pro-rep, although they have done nothing about it.

She thinks it may be possible to get pro-rep on the agenda by the next election. 'What's needed (and the missing step in the Ontario and BC initiatives) is a really good public process, to engage voters in why first-past-the-post is not a good system. You can't propose a change in the voting system to MMP or STV in a vacuum, you first need to establish that we're scuppered in our current system. Once you've got people saying first-past-the-post is bad, then move on to alternatives.' What's needed, she says, is an accessible Royal Commission that travels the land with its high level of citizen engagement, education and mobilization.

Going To Ottawa

May talked about her role in Parliament, 'I don't want to be known as the valiant voice in the wilderness that speaks the truth but doesn't accomplish anything.'

For starters: 'You've heard me say many times that I want to end heckling in the House and I don't make promises that I don't keep.' Achieving this goal depends partly, she says, on who becomes the Speaker of the House, since the Speaker could simply end heckling him/herself—it's against the rules of Parliament. However,

her 'sit down at once if heckled' strategy triggers the Speaker to enforce the rules. 'Even in a majority government, even as a single MP—I know the rules and my strategy should work. I will lead the demand for the enforcement of the rules.'

Cooperation

She sees the conflict between speaking truth and building bridges but is determined to make it work.

'What's the most important issue that requires attention? The climate crisis. Will I make the climate crisis my top, immediate priority? Probably not; because I know I can't get anywhere till I lay the groundwork with greater cooperation between MPs—and I'm going to need to get some Conservatives onside.' This, she says, is going to be delicate because Harper-style government allows no party member dissent.

Working for cooperative solutions in the House is hugely important, she emphasizes, 'I can network among kindred spirits. Where I have success, I probably won't be able to tell you about it because it will be with an MP from another party, where confidentiality really matters.' Messages of congratulation and welcome from Conservative backbenchers were coming in on her Blackberry during our conversation.

Lending A Hand

'What I want to be able to do is get better research and support and make it available to backbenchers who don't get much help from their own parties.'

'There are lots of MPs in a parliamentary committee hearing, with an expert witness giving evidence, who have their chance to ask a question but they basically tread water. They've got nothing useful to say; the reason for that is they don't have the resources to know the issue very well, they don't want to look like buffoons but their party isn't supporting them to be effective. So, our party can support them to be effective, but I can never take credit for that because that would 'out' somebody.'

'I will be working four times as hard as the average MP and I will be hoping that accolades will go to others because that will mean I am succeeding in getting change.'

'I'm only one person. If there is a parliamentary committee looking at legislation to gut the *Fisheries Act* and one looking at pay equity for women, I need to cultivate my relationships with people in other parties and offer them help.'

To aid in this, she says, she will make full use of the excellent research capabilities of a network of many

© Island Tides Publishing Ltd. This article may be reproduced with this attribution, in its entirety, with notification to Island Tides Publishing Ltd.

'This article was published (June 2, 2011) in 'Island Tides', an independent, regional newspaper distributing across the Southern Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Victoria to Nanaimo.'

Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada. Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.
Email: islandtides@islandtides.com. Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>

NGOs, such as the eastcoast Genuine Progress Indicator. Such NGOs' advice is free and open to all political parties but is virtually ignored by other parties. 'I need research', says May. 'I need tons of it.'

She is also going to need interns or volunteers. She says she won't have a big enough budget for all the work she wants to have done, but she wants to attract bright young people. If she can find a way for them to keep body and soul together, she wants to build this team of politically-savvy interns to work alongside friendly MPs.

These young people can turn up at a committee about which they know 'tons' with MPs whose party isn't interested in taking the time to make them look good. It's perfectly normal, May says, for non-committee members to hand briefing notes to committee members, giving instant information on the point at hand.

'That's how I can plan to do more than one person can do by themselves. And if I'm doing a good job, you won't know! But that's what voters in Saanich-Gulf Islands have elected me to do, to make Parliament work.'

She says in that Ottawa she has to be watchful for moves by the Harper majority government to destroy what's left of environmental legislation. Currently, she is very concerned about proposed changes to the *Fisheries Act*, which might remove protection of fish habitat.

Getting Legislation Through

'It would be wonderful to say that I am going to get this legislation or that legislation passed through private member's bills, but the reality is that I've got to be playing defense rather than offense in the first little bit. I am going to look for any opportunity to network with friends in the Conservative caucus.

'When I get my chance at a Private Member's Bill, I will have been working in advance from day one to get support from the Conservatives. It's more important to have a success than the perfect bill that doesn't pass. So it won't be the Private Member's Bill that enforces climate action. It might be the Private Member's Bill that extends pension benefits to superannuates who married after age 60, and whose spouses currently don't get benefits. That is an issue where Conservatives should have helped out pensioners.'

Being On The Hill

Asked what she looks forward to most as an MP, May says it is being in the foyer of the House for the press scrum. She also looks forward to access to resources, and an office on Parliament Hill.

The model for her office will be the office of Jim Fulton

(MP for Skeena from 1978–1993), whose office was 'a hubbub, a beehive of activity—it was a combination of parliament office, MP office, and NGO.'

Climate Change

About global Green connections, May says that congratulations are flooding in from around the world. She thinks that her global connections will be the way to be effective in climate change initiatives and says that she will continue to attend global Green meetings.

In December, she goes to Durban for COP 17, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's 2011 meeting. She could go with the Canadian delegation but thinks it may not be the best delegation within which to work. As a representative of Papua-New Guinea or the Maldives she would have greater access to decision-making and strategy. Her connections with elected Greens worldwide, who are often ministers of environment, will make her work in Durban more effective.

The Media & The Green Election Result

May is not happy with many news outlets. She says that the 4 or 5 vertically integrated big media owners in Canada like the status quo. She says she challenges the status quo, hence little media coverage.

She says it's time to pull the plug on The Consortium; it should not be allowed to organize the National Leadership Debate. She has no illusions that, with continued Consortium control, she could be locked out of the next debate, despite her seat in the House.

Her exclusion from the multi-outlet debate, she claims, caused the drop in Green Party vote percentage across the country in the 304 ridings in which the Green Party ran candidates. In polling, Green support sank dramatically the morning after a debate in which she had no voice.

She also points to the effect of lack of media coverage for the Green Leader's cross-country whistlestop train tour, and points to the effect of not publishing anything about the Green Party's platform 'Vision Green' (available online at www.greenparty.ca).

However, though country-wide the Green vote dropped from 6.8 to 3.9% of the popular vote, Greens still ran third in 18 ridings.

On the other hand, she praises westcoast CHEK and CHCH for giving her a television voice in Saanich-Gulf Islands, where she garnered 46% of a 75% voter turn-out.

Her Party

In the next four years, she says that Canadian Greens will either build the party, or not, based on whether her conduct and achievement prove the value of a single Green Party seat in the House. 'And I hope that I will prove that value and that more Canadians in more ridings will say, 'That's what we need, we need more people with the leader of the Green Party because she is consistently telling us the truth, she is consistently working well with others, and we never hear her attacking other people's personalities or foibles, she sticks to the point, and she's ended heckling in question period, so let's support her with more MPs.'

'So that's what will build the Green Party,' she declares. 'I'm very non-partisan; if the Green Party ceased to exist but we got another party to adopt all our policies, I'd be quite happy. But I think we are going to need the Green Party to be much stronger to get our policies adopted.'

May spoke of a disabled woman who, upon reading the Green Party policy on eliminating poverty among the disabled, insisted on paying for a \$10 Green Party membership out of her tiny income. Green policies, May says, are informed by the outstanding research done by

experts in public policy, working through NGOs.

In regards to electing more Green representatives in the short term, May says that with a bunch of provincial elections coming up in the fall, she will be available to help elect provincial MLAs. Canadians now know that Greens are electable even in a first-past-the-post system.

Also she says that by 2015 there is a 90% chance of a federal by-election which is winnable by the Green Party. She expects not to be the only Green MP in the House when the next election comes round.

Go Girl, Go!

Asked about her phenomenal energy level, May says that she is blessed by sleeping well, prayer helps her, and that she is by nature an optimist.

'I can't take much credit for it,' she adds. 'My mother was tireless; compared to my Mom, I'm a slacker.' She pauses to show me a photo of her mother speaking in the Trafalgar Square rally following the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's Aldermaston March. Elizabeth is the little girl beside her at the microphone. ✍