

It's May's day

Green party's new national leader promises to be a breath of fresh air



By STEPHEN MAHER Ottawa Bureau

Elizabeth May, leader of the Green Party of Canada, is all smiles after winning the leadership Saturday. Ms. May, a former Sierra Club executive director, says it shouldn't take voters long to recognize that her shoot-from-the-lip political style is a little bit different from that of traditional politicians. (FRED CHARTRAND / CP)

OTTAWA — You don't have to spend much time with Elizabeth May to see she's serious in saying she doesn't plan to be a traditional politician.

The newly elected leader of the Green Party of Canada says things that most politicians would never, ever say.

For example, she admits she might not win a seat in Cape Breton-Canso in the next election. She doesn't really agree with her party's opposition to the seal hunt.

She praises politicians in other parties, including Alexa McDonough, Brian Mulroney and former Liberal environment minister Stephane Dion.

Ms. May will even comment on Premier Rodney Mac-Donald's recent marital problems.

"They probably got married too young — a neighbourhood observation," she said over lunch in Ottawa on Tuesday. "But having failed to hang on to any marriage, I'm not going to judge. Obviously, if he were cheating on his wife, I would kind of hold that against him, but I don't think that should be a political issue."

Ms. May seems to say more or less exactly what she thinks about everything — a rarity in Ottawa, where party leaders try to avoid saying anything important unless they run it past their teams of advisers and pollsters.

The former leader of the environmental group the Sierra Club, Ms. May won the leadership of the Greens this weekend on the first ballot. She was raised in Connecticut but lived for years in Margaree Harbour and rose to national prominence largely because of her work in pushing for a cleanup of the Sydney tar ponds.

She vows that she will not avoid controversy now that she is a politician.

Even as she celebrated her victory with her speech on the weekend, she shocked many by calling for the North American Free Trade Agreement to be renegotiated.

Ms. May does not look like Canada's four other party leaders. She describes herself as "an overweight 52-year-old with a bad hip," dresses stylishly but casually and has an unruly mop of greying blond hair. She is unusually animated as she talks, cracking politically incorrect jokes and laughing often.

She said she won't even have to point out that she is different from the other party leaders.

"I don't have to say a thing," she said. "It's going to be obvious. It's just how it plays out. Four guys in suits who are going to be into prescribed sound-bite mode, with their groomers and handlers having coached them. And they're not going to be thinking on their feet. And they're not going to say what they really think. And I think voters will catch on to that pretty fast."

The Greens have a budget of more than \$1 million and won more than five per cent of the vote in the last election with a leader who was not as media-savvy or well-known as Ms. May. She predicted the party will do better now and will soon elect its first members, but she's not sure she will be the first.

She has promised to run in Cape Breton-Canso in the next election but acknowledged it would be quite an upset if she were to beat the popular Liberal MP, Rodger Cuzner.

But she said she doesn't need to win the riding to be successful.

"I need to get into the House of Commons, clearly, but if I'm not the first Green party member in the House of Commons, that's not so bad," she said.

"What really matters is that the next federal election campaign includes a really good debate on the issues that matter. And the 2006 campaign clearly didn't. I want to make democracy work in Canada. If I don't win my own seat but we elect Greens to the House of Commons and (Stephen) Harper doesn't become prime minister, I won't think I've failed."

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