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New leader of Greens sees inroads in Quebec

JANE TABER
SENIOR POLITICAL WRITER

OTTAWA -- Elizabeth May, the media-savvy environmentalist elected this weekend as the Green Party's new national leader, says she speaks better French than Stephen Harper and boldly predicted breakthroughs in Quebec in the next election.

The 52-year-old former head of the Sierra Club of Canada, who is a long-time family friend of former U.S. president Bill Clinton, also said she'll develop a platform that will include renegotiating NAFTA.

This was a policy shift that was adopted at the weekend convention in Ottawa and one that Ms. May pushed for.

She said the free-trade deal is not working and there should be a debate about what should happen with it and how it could be renegotiated.

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"The softwood lumber situation to me is the death knell for NAFTA," said Ms. May, referring to the deal struck recently between the Harper government and the Bush administration in a conflict that the NAFTA dispute-settlement mechanism failed to solve.

"It's not the Green Party calling for NAFTA to be killed," she said. "Mr. Harper just killed it because of where it might have advantage to Canadian business long-term."

Ms. May said she will steal a page from NDP Leader Jack Layton's book by showing up every day on Parliament Hill and sitting in the Commons gallery during Question Period. Mr. Layton used this approach fairly successfully when he was first elected NDP Leader but did not yet have a seat in the House of Commons.

The Green Party, which collected 4.5 per cent of the vote in the past federal election and ran candidates in all 308 ridings, has never elected an MP to the House.

Ms. May said she will run anywhere in the country if a by-election comes up, though her choice would be to become a candidate in Cape Breton for the next federal election.

But she is also predicting a breakthrough in Quebec based on the fact that a provincial Green candidate, Xavier Daxhelet, came second to PQ Leader André Boisclair in the recent by-election.

What she failed to mention is that the Liberals and Action Démocratique du Québec did not run candidates against the PQ Leader, which is customary in Quebec when a new leader seeks a seat. Mr. Daxhelet received 11.8 per cent of the vote compared to 70.8 per cent for Mr. Boisclair.

Ms. May, who is the single mother of a 15-year-old daughter, replaced Jim Harris. He had led the party for the past four years and through the two elections.

She ran against veteran Green Party member and deputy leader David Chernushenko. He received 33 per cent of the vote; St. Catharines realtor Jim Fannon won 0.88 per cent, or 29 votes. Some of the nearly 3,300 Greens who voted cast ballots at the convention in person, but many voted by mail-in ballot.

Mr. Chernushenko said yesterday that he was on a bit of an "emotional roller coaster" and will take a week to decide what role he may play in the party. However, he vowed to run again in Ottawa Centre, where he collected 10 per cent of the vote in the 2006 election. And he said he was pleased with the convention exercise that showed Canadians the Greens are a serious party and "not just a bunch of people wearing Birkenstocks meeting in a bar."

Mr. Fannon, meanwhile, gave one of the wackiest leadership speeches ever Friday night, constantly wiping sweat away from his face, thanking his mother and the person who is looking after his Rotweiler, Baby. He referred to Ms. May as "Elizabeth freakin' May," a reference to her work and reputation as a leading and outspoken environmentalist in the country.

It's that reputation that will be both an asset and liability for the party, said Nik Nanos, pollster and head of SES Research.

"The Greens have to make sure they don't fall into the trap of being a one-issue party," Mr. Nanos said. "In a way, by electing Elizabeth May it's a great opportunity but it's also a great risk."

Mr. Nanos noted that the Harper Conservatives are set to release their environmental plan in the fall, but he cautioned the Greens to use that as an opportunity to showcase both Ms. May's expertise and other Green ideas while Canadians are listening.

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