AN INTERVIEW WITH JIM HARRIS

Leader of the Green Party of Canada



1) As you know, the Canadian population is increasingly diverse. Many wonder if that diversity is being reflected in our elected institutions. Can you please give us some idea of the diversity of your caucus? For example, how many women, immigrants, visible minorities, and Aboriginal peoples were elected in your party in the last federal election?

In 2003, fewer than 20% of MPs were women. Minorities and Aboriginals are also considerably underrepresented in the House of Commons. Canada's diversity is not reflected in its government and proportional representation is the only effective way to bring gender equity to the House of Commons.

Due to the present first-past-the-post electoral system, the Green Party did not elect any members to Parliament despite having received nearly 600,000 votes. If Canada had a proportional electoral system in place, we would have nine sitting MPs in the Commons.

The Co-Chair of our Shadow Cabinet is Sharon Labchuk, who was the Green Party candidate in the riding of Malpeque (Prince Edward Island), and won 5.5% of the vote on June 28 – the highest ever of any candidate east of Montreal. As a rule, at least one of the three Co-Chairs must be a woman.

In addition to recruiting more female candidates, the Green Party is also actively recruiting more Aboriginals to run in the next election. In 2004, Gary Sanipass, the Chief of the Bouctouche Reserve, was a Green Party candidate in the riding of Mirimachi, New Brunswick.

Currently, our Shadow Cabinet is composed of four Francophones, one First Nation, one Asian, one Ukrainian, one Italian, and nine other members of European descent.

2) What measures has your party taken to involve immigrants and minorities as party members, electoral candidates, and MPs? Are these measures working? Does more need to be done?

Again, electoral reform is imperative if women and minorities are to be equally represented in government. A move towards proportional representation in Parliament would be major step forward in having a more balanced political system.

We also advocate respect for diversity, and the importance of honouring cultural, linguistic, ethnic, sexual, religious and spiritual differences within the context of individual responsibility toward all beings. We defend the right of all persons, without discrimination, to an environment supportive of their dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well being, and the building of respectful, positive and responsible relationships across lines of division in the spirit of a multicultural society. This requires:

- Recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples to the basic means of their survival, both economic and cultural, including rights to land and self determination; and acknowledgment of their contribution to the common heritage of national and global culture;
- Recognition of the rights of ethnic minorities to develop their culture, religion and language without discrimination, and to full legal, social and cultural participation in the democratic process;
- Recognition of and respect for sexual minorities;
- Equality between women and men in all spheres of social, economic, political and cultural life.

3) Research suggests that in order to secure a party's nomination, immigrants and minorities need to have more education, more experience and deeper roots in their communities. Given that in order to run, a candidate must first be nominated, how do you ensure that immigrants and minorities are able to participate equitably in nomination contests?

Immigrants and minorities must first not be viewed as token candidates chosen to appeal to a specific voting base in a specific riding. Such candidates need to be offered opportunities to run in what are traditionally "safe" ridings for political parties, as opposed to serving as cannon fodder in the face of defeat.

For instance, the Quebec Liberal Party often sacrifices immigrant candidates to ridings that are un-winnable, yet use their participation to promote the diversity of their team. This is unacceptable. A candidate of Haitian descent should not be relegated to only running in ridings with a large Haitian population, or in a riding where the hopes of winning are equivalent to a snow ball's chance in Cancun. Tight limits must be placed on nomination finance rules to ensure that minorities and/or women, who may not have the network of potential donors as other candidates, have an equitable chance at winning. Instant memberships must end, as witnessed by the Green Party's 60 day rule for membership before voting.

If elected, the Green Party would commit to establishing stable and sufficient levels of federal funding to ensure that minority groups in Canada can be full participants in the decisions that affect their lives.

4) Outside of the electoral arena, how does your party involve a diverse range of Canadians in, for example, consultation activities or the setting of party policy? What challenges do you face in trying to reflect the interests of some many individuals?

The Green Party offers a unique approach to policy development: The Living Platform (www.lp.greenparty.ca). A broader consensus needs to emerge on policy questions to reflect a wider ideological spectrum, and that is why we developed a public forum where people can discuss Green Party of Canada policies, contribute to the research and development of the party platform, and explore public policy issues.

5) Communicating with Canadians is a necessary part of politics. What methods do you use to communicate with a diverse range of Canadians? How do you reconcile your party's concern for environmental responsibility with the need to reach a broad audience which may or may not have access to web- or television-based media?

Our communication strategy is not unlike our politics, in that it is a truly grassroots movement. In addition to citizen's assemblies and public forums, we also put out a monthly electronic newsletter and have just recently completed our new membership brochure. Most importantly, however, is our proximity to the issues that affect everyone. Now more than ever, Canadians are looking to the Green Party for solutions to issues that transcend partisan politics; food safety, aboriginal rights, and sustainable economics are just some of the reasons why we connect with Canadians more than any other political party in Canada – because we know what really matters, and what needs to be done.