

Ottawa-area Greens working to cut through the noise – including their party's – to resonate with voters

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Shaughn McArthur is the Green candidate in Pontiac. PHOTO BY ERROL MCGIHON /Postmedia

Article content

Between extreme weather events, unrealized opportunities to participate in a greening economy and growing impatience with the efforts of political leaders thus far to respond to the “code red” crisis of man-made climate change, Green party candidates in the National Capital Region see plenty of reasons why their party is the one to cast a ballot for in 2021. More, perhaps, than ever

But, like a toddler, or a teenager, who decides to throw a tantrum at the most inopportune of times, local Greens are also dealing with the fallout of highly public party infighting at the national level, with their highest-profile member, leader Annamie Paul, at the centre of a firestorm in the months leading up to the election call.



It's all rather complicated, but it involves a then-advisor of Paul accusing party MPs of anti-Semitism during the spring-time escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Paul refusing to condemn this, a Green MP crossing the floor to join the Liberals and internal challenges to Paul's leadership.

"I'm ex-military, and so I feel that ... there was a huge distraction, obviously, in the party. It was not mission-oriented," said Green party candidate and health critic Dr. Jennifer Purdy, a physician running for the second time in Kanata–Carleton.

"If our mission is climate emergency and helping people out in our ridings and in Canada and then of course around the world ... Well, then this totally took the party off its primary mission, and that's deeply regrettable. So it has been frustrating."



Dr. Jennifer Purdy is the Green candidate for Kanata-Carleton. PHOTO BY JENNIFER PURDY /Handout

Purdy does think the party's recent challenges have had an impact on donations locally and some volunteers have been "a little reticent" to come out and help with her campaign. But thankfully, she said, there is a core group of dedicated supporters and Green members, "and we're just pushing on and just focusing on local issues for our riding."

These include getting light rail extended to Kanata and more financial support for farmers and for research to support more sustainable farming practices, plus marquee Green priorities like a guaranteed liveable income and the ending of fossil fuel subsidies.

Purdy's in a race with no incumbent following the decision of Kanata-Carleton Liberal MP Karen McCrimmon not to run again. While Purdy took just 6.6 per cent of the vote in 2019, she says she's an optimist, "and this riding could be up for grabs."

As for the party, things seem to have settled down nationally, Purdy said. She's actually very impressed with Paul — "to err is human," she said of the "significant misstep" in the spring —

and everyone looks laser-focused on the campaign and getting out their messaging on the climate emergency. Though Canadians might not need much prodding, Purdy noted.

In Ottawa, farmers have been dealing with inconsistent weather, and all residents have been sweating through a heat wave. Purdy saw a child with asthma at a COVID-19 assessment clinic and said the only reason she could come up with for the worsening of her condition was its perfect alignment with changes in air quality.

“I think it behooves and it’s ethically important for people campaigning across the country to be talking about this and to be talking about a realistic plan,” Purdy said.

Across the Ottawa River in the sprawling riding of Pontiac in western Quebec, first-time candidate Shaughn McArthur also believes it possible that Pontiac sends a Green to Parliament.

There’s the United Nations climate change report of early August, which found that changes already set in motion will be irreversible for lifetimes, but that humans still have a window to avert catastrophe. And then there’s the local context, McArthur noted, which included devastating flooding in 2017 and 2019.

The candidate has a vision for the riding, where agricultural and forestry are traditional industries, to be a leading player in the “new green economy.”

But to get there, “This can’t any longer be just a patchwork of a bunch of communities — some have, some have-not,” McArthur said. “We need to bring everybody along in this process and we need to pay attention to those parts of the riding who have been largely ignored, because they’re rural, because they’re further away.”

He’s taking a novel approach to connecting with some of those areas: a 150-kilometre paddle, starting Sunday, from Maniwaki to Ottawa.

As for the party’s “family disputes,” McArthur says they’ll be sorted out and, meanwhile, no one’s expecting the Greens to form government in 2021. He’s encouraging people to vote locally and to vote with their conscience.

“When you vote for a Green, you’re sending an ambassador of Pontiac to Ottawa. When you vote for the representative of one of the big parties, you get an ambassador of the (prime minister’s office) in your riding,” he asserted.

In her conversations with voters in Ottawa Centre, a constituency that’s highly engaged politically, Angela Keller-Herzog has found that people are aware of the troubles the party was dealing with. And they want to know the Green Party is getting over it, she said.



Angela Keller-Herzog is the Green candidate in Ottawa Centre. PHOTO BY ANGELA KELLER-HERZOG /Handout

For Keller-Herzog, who also ran for the Greens in 2019 and took 7.4 per cent of the vote in the riding, the second-highest of any in Ottawa, party squabbles have been disappointing, but she sees them as growing pains.

She also points out that, unlike the big three parties, the Greens don't whip members' votes in Parliament, which allows for better reflection of constituency concerns, she contends.

“We Greens think that we should be closer to the ground.”

Among Keller-Herzog's electoral ideas are: preservation of the urban tree canopy, with one threat being the plan for the new Civic campus of The Ottawa Hospital near Dow's Lake; incentivizing investment by individuals in renewable energy installations in their homes and communities; revving up the energy-retrofit industry; and attaching “green strings,” or a climate lens, to federal investment in transportation projects.

A Green MP can also critique and hold major parties accountable for their policies and actions — or lack of them — on climate issues, Keller-Herzog said.

“I think that there has never been a time where the Green Party is so needed.”

With files from Postmedia