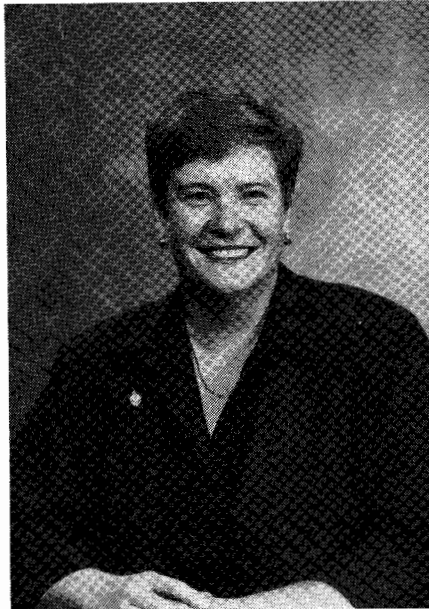

Interview with Deborah Grey, MP

Born and raised in Vancouver, Deborah Grey attended high school at the Burrard Inlet Bible Institute in Port Moody, B.C. before going on to university where she obtained degrees in Sociology and English as well as in education at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. She has been a foster parent, a lifeguard, a farm helper, a camp counsellor and a sports coach. In 1989 she was elected as the first Member of Parliament for the Reform Party. The interview was conducted in Ottawa by Christopher Guly.



Did you have any political experience before you were elected to the House of Commons?

No, and I suppose there are pro's and con's to that. I had to learn absolutely everything. On the other hand, I had no political baggage and did not owe anyone a favour. I had voted Tory in 1984 and saw that the country's financial situation had become quite devastating. Before that, while I lived in Vancouver I always voted Liberal. My family roots are Liberal. As a teenager I fell in love with (former Prime Minister) Pierre Trudeau but in my heart of hearts, I have always been a small "c" conservative.

I was also feeling western alienation and, one day while sitting around the coffee table with my neighbour Liz White, I asked her what she thought about this "Reform Party". We still laugh about it every time we have coffee. She asked me, "Why don't you run?" I said, "Liz, don't be ridiculous".

What were you doing at the time?

In the Fall of 1988, I was teaching Social Studies 10 about Canadian government and citizenship and was really getting into it.

Liz got me on the phone with Pat Chern, who (until recently) was president of my riding. Pat said, "I hear you're thinking about becoming a candidate". I had not given it a lot of thought. It was before Christmas and I had no money after spending the summer before in England. But, finally I said I would and the local board of education granted me six weeks of leave without pay.

I am an optimist and Alberta had been Tory country since the 1972 sweep. But as it turned out on election night (Monday, November 21, 1988), I placed fourth with 4,000 out of 30,000 votes. Not bad at all considering a friend of mine said any more than our two votes would be a bonus. (Tory John Dahmer

went on to win Beaver River with 13,000 votes).

The next day I caught up on some sleep and wrote thank-you cards. By Wednesday, I was back in the classroom. Five days later, I learned that the new MP, John Dahmer, had passed away. Of course, the first question on everyone's mind was do we go for the by-election?

I was tired and had taken time off school, knowing that the board was not about to ask me how many weeks I wanted this time. I phoned Preston Manning, who lived just four miles from the boundary of the riding. Well, he came out and had a meeting with a few people. They told him that he had a good, credible candidate and that he should let her carry on.

So, I taught all of December, all of January and all of February. I campaigned at night in the freezing cold. I would be marking papers while driving. It was ridiculous, like running on a treadmill. But after a while, you could feel the momentum, typical of a by-election when the government is secure and people feel like taking a chance. I remember Deputy Prime Minister Don Mazankowski saying, "She's a blip on the political scene, a one-term wonder. Maybe that's true, I thought, but that would be one term longer than a lot of Canadians would have had to serve in the House of Commons.

Given the government's traditional popularity in Alberta, do you think you will survive politically?

Who knows what will happen? People are fickle, but I can't spend

my life worrying about what will happen. I did win 50 per cent of the vote in the by-election and received 11,000 votes. My Tory challenger, Dave Broda, received only 6,000. He ran a slick nomination campaign that led to a nine-and-a-half hour on meeting. There were 4,500 people (including me) at the local ice arena for that meeting. Mr. Broda said, "Tonight is the election and March 13 will be the coronation since Alberta is Tory country"! I thought to myself, not if I could help it.

Did you think you might win?

There was a momentum building. People were coming up to me saying that we would give them a good scare. On election night, I brought my mother up from Victoria. The media had all come to my campaign office because they thought what would be the better story: "number 25 Tory backbencher wins" or "Reform Party candidate makes Canadian history". Twenty minutes after the polls closed that evening, the phone started ringing and every poll was double in our favour. I was wild. I was not just thinking that I would become a member of Parliament but the whole idea of making Canadian history was swirling around inside me too. Once ten of the 165 polls reported, I knew that my whole life had been turned upside down.

Were you concerned about how much an independent member could accomplish?

There was no guarantee I would not become a voice in the wilderness. But remarks that appear in the Alberta press, which are very critical of some of the things I do and say, as well as about my voting and attendance records tell me that they are paying attention. I do not ask anyone to either agree or disagree with me, just to hear me out and respect me.

Has it ever been tempting to jump ship and join the Tories?

Never, although I have heard that some thought that once I went down there I would cross the floor. Don't you think it would have been easier to have run for them in the first place. Besides, I would probably have been the third, after David Kilgour (Edmonton Southeast) and Alex Kindy (Calgary Northwest) to be kicked out of caucus. As a member of Parliament, you must represent your constituents and I could not support the Goods and Services Tax (GST).

I also think there should be a free vote in caucus. Obviously the majority rules. It's like Grade 3, do we decide to play soccer or football? I think that there is a place within our parliamentary system to defeat a bill without defeating the government.

Is it awkward not being the leader but being your party's only voice in the House?

It doesn't bother me. I am not interested in power. Every Wednesday, we hold a "caucus" meeting. I and my research staff talk with Mr. Manning, Steven Harper, our party's policy advisor and Stan Waters.

In hindsight, it worked out best that Mr. Manning did not run in the by-election. He would have had to spend 85 per cent of his time on legislative stuff. Now, he is free to travel all over and keep the bushes burning.

What have you learned so far in your first term?

First and foremost, about procedures of how things work and about the political system. I have also learned that sometimes you cannot predict what is going to happen in the House or believe what you are told.

I remember the debate on linguistic duality in the Meech Lake Accord. I asked (then Government House Leader) Doug Lewis to tell me how long the debate would go on before unanimous consent was sought. He told me Thursday, Friday, Monday and on Tuesday, a vote would be taken. On Thursday afternoon, (Prime Minister Brian Mulroney) spoke, Opposition Leader Herb Gray spoke, and by then I had to rush back to my office in the Confederation Building to prepare to leave for Alberta that evening. I was watching my TV and Lorne Nystrom (NDP, Yorkton-Melville) had just finished speaking. A vote was quickly taken and unanimous consent was passed. So I rushed back to the House to get in a point of order, but it was too late.

How do you handle the stress of working on the Hill?

By getting home, getting away from this island of unreality. I go home and be with real people. Have a game of scrabble with my friend Hilda. Try hard to guard my life and the special friendships in it. My faith is the underlying basis of my life. It helps keep me sane. It also helps a lot that when I go home and go to church, people tell me that they pray for me. I still sing in a gospel group at Dewberry Community Church. I sing tenor and have been called the "Iron Snowbird", because I kind of sound like Anne Murray. The "iron" part of that comes from someone who said that if Maggie Thatcher had come from St. Paul, Alberta, she probably would have sounded like me.