

Canadian Elections: Support David Orchard in Desnethé-Missinippi-Churchill River

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THIS COUNTRY: ELECTION WATCH: 'LONE WOLF' AT PARLIAMENT'S DOOR

The king maker seeks a crown of his own

To some, David Orchard is a loose cannon and a cult leader. To others, he's principled, stubborn and right. Either way, he's one of Stéphane Dion's few candidates on the Prairies with a good shot at winning a seat

ROY MacGREGOR

CHOICELAND, SASK. — It is early evening, with military stripes of geese moving across the harvest moon that hangs over this field where two combines have been running well into the dark.

But theirs aren't the only lights on the landscape.

David Orchard, the Liberal candidate in Desnethé-Missinippi-Churchill River, is roaring down the back roads in his 1981 Oldsmobile, a high plume of dust billowing behind. He is chasing someone – not votes, but a half-ton carrying two men clad in hunter's orange.

Back and forth the vehicles race, the truck once giving Mr. Orchard the slip until he loops back and finally flags it down.

He wants the hunters to leave. Roughly half of his 2,000 acres are given over to organic farming and half to its natural state, with the restored woods now home to 40 elk.

Mr. Orchard has nothing against hunting. To do so would be foolhardy in this riding, which makes up most of northern Saskatchewan and whose population is 66-per-cent aboriginal – but not on his land, not his elk.

Ron Engel, who is helping Mr. Orchard harvest his wheat, watches, bemused. "You know," he says, shaking his head, if forced to choose between losing by "a single vote or letting that guy hunt, David would choose losing."

PLASTIC-WRAPPED DEAL

If the suave, bearded guy in the Dos Equis beer ads is "the most interesting man in the

world,” David Orchard may be the most interesting man in an election in which interest is in short supply. He is considered, by much of the media and many Liberals, as – take your pick – scary, cultish, weird, intransigent, out of touch, a zealot. But he is seen by his followers as – pick again – principled, brilliant, charming, caring, stubborn and right.

The organic farmer and free-trade activist has run for Parliament once before, losing in 2000 as a Progressive Conservative, and twice contested the leadership of that party before becoming a Liberal and aiding in the rise of Stéphane Dion.

In fact, he is the only double kingmaker in Canadian politics: Two years ago, he delivered as many as 150 delegates to put Mr. Dion in a position where fellow candidates Martha Hall Findlay and Gerard Kennedy could help him win the leadership. In 2003, he threw his support to PC winner Peter MacKay, only to be “betrayed,” he says, when Mr. MacKay broke their pact not to seek union with Stephen Harper’s Canadian Alliance.

Mr. Orchard does not forget easily. He reaches back into the trunk of his ragged Oldsmobile, with more than 700,000 kilometres on the odometer, and hauls out the agreement Mr. MacKay signed – carefully wrapped in plastic for posterity. Nor will he forgive the man who went on to become Defence Minister in Mr. Harper’s government.

Dismissed by Joe Clark as “a tourist” in the old PC party, Mr. Orchard seemed, to some, even more the stranger in Liberal cloth, and when he was denied a shot at the nomination in last winter’s by-election for Desnethé-Missinippi-Churchill River – Mr. Dion appointed Joan Beatty, who had been a provincial minister as a New Democrat – it was believed he might again charge betrayal.

Instead, he accepted the insider talk that provincial strongman Ralph Goodale had pushed Ms. Beatty because she’s a woman and aboriginal. In the end, she lost to Rob Clarke, a Conservative now running for re-election with the advantage of incumbency, a leader well liked in the Prairies, and the Liberals’ Green Shift as popular in the West as the mountain pine beetle.

Undaunted, Mr. Orchard put his legendary organizational skills to work and decisively defeated Ms. Beatty for the nomination – remarkably with impressive support from the aboriginal people in this sprawling riding the size of Germany. “No one will decide who will be our voice,” says Duane Favel, mayor of the village of Isle-a-la-Crosse. “We will tell you who is our voice.”

Although Mr. Clarke also is aboriginal, Mr. Orchard “can win here, absolutely,” says Donna Kingfisher, a councillor at Sturgeon Lake First Nation.

The challenge, he freely admits, will be in getting out the Liberal native vote and in picking up enough support in the more conservative southern farmland to take the seat. His main pitch to the grain farmers is to defend the Canadian Wheat Board, which the Harper government would like to eliminate, but it will be tough sledding. Party insiders say the Liberals have a chance at electing just two members in Saskatchewan: Mr. Goodale in Regina and Mr. Orchard.

Mr. Dion is not helping, although Mr. Orchard remains steadfast in his support. He considers himself a fervent environmentalist, but the Green Shift is a non-starter here, and Mr. Dion’s recent \$650-million compensation package for farmers reflects that backlash.

"No plan is perfect," he says. "And I don't want to see fishers, farmers or Northerners penalized for using fuel for which they have no alternative. There's no solar tractors yet."

ASHES UNDER ROCKS

At 58, David Hugh Orchard looks slightly boyish. He has lost his glasses and the dark mustache that made him look like a riverboat gambler. He is soft-spoken despite the hard line he takes on many issues.

He appeared on the national stage in 1985 when he founded Citizens Concerned About Free Trade, but his politics go back to his childhood and a father who preached, "You give till it hurts" when it comes to community involvement.

His parents, Ralph and Margaret Anna, remain so central to his guiding principles that he farms both original family homesteads – one near Choiceland, northeast of Prince Albert, and the other near Borden, northwest of Saskatoon. And he keeps their ashes beneath two huge boulders near a replica of their original log homestead.

He went to Halcyonia, the one-room school John George Diefenbaker attended, sitting at the same desk and carving "D.H.O." under the "J.G.D." the Chief put there decades earlier.

His childhood heroes remain his grown-up heroes: Mr. Diefenbaker, of course, and Sir John A. Macdonald, but also Louis Riel, the Métis leader hanged for treason in 1885.

While still a teenager, he joined other farmers for a 1969 tractor convoy into Saskatoon to confront Pierre Trudeau, then prime minister. Little did he know that a generation later, Mr. Trudeau would persuade him to join a party and eventually stand for office.

He dropped out of law school after a year and set off to see the world. When he returned, he and his brothers – Douglas, Grant and Lyle – decided to try organic farming. "We were pioneers," he says.

He learned French, became politicized and spoke out against free trade and the Meech Lake accord, which put him back into contact with Mr. Trudeau. Senator Keith Davey had tried to get him to run for the Liberals in 1988, but he had declined, deciding that the Tories were a better fit.

Mr. Trudeau, however, "encouraged me to run for the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party. He said, 'You can be the most popular man in Canada, but without a political vehicle, you will end up a voice crying in the wilderness.' It was as if the voice of God had spoken."

He took the advice, signed up thousands of backers and stunned the media by coming second to Mr. Clark in 1998.

Two years later, he went to Montreal to visit Mr. Trudeau, by then very ill with cancer. " 'You're not a usual politician,' " he says Mr. Trudeau told him. " 'You don't want to turn this country over to great enterprises. For what it's worth, I'll be supporting you and watching from this side.' "

"It wasn't until I left that I realized he had said goodbye."

People are watching from all sides these days, some Liberals desperately hoping he wins, some desperate that he not. They fear his strong stances – he condemned the Afghanistan coalition, he spoke up for Lebanon in its conflict with Israel – and they shudder to think what he might say next.

“Is it a colonial mentality that you’re not supposed to speak up?” he asks. “John A. Macdonald spoke up. When Pierre Trudeau spoke out against Meech Lake, newspapers were vituperative about this bitter old man who couldn’t stand to be left out. The chattering class, the smart people attacked him – but who turned out by the millions to vote with him?”

He realizes he is considered a loose cannon by many in the party and, in particular, by the eastern media, but says that “my ideas are actually more mainstream. I speak for those who are wanting to preserve Canada’s sovereignty.”

Although Mr. Orchard has an almost evangelical hold on his followers, the eastern establishment, with its distrust of populism and preference for sophistication, finds his presence unpolished, his passions over the top, his beliefs somehow suspect. Elizabeth Kearns of White Rock, B.C., who has followed him for years and come here to help his campaign, says he makes the establishment shudder because “they’re scared of someone who might want to do something for Canada.”

According to Mr. Orchard, “the press makes much of this cult thing. When another leadership candidate moves and people move with him, it’s described as loyalty, not some cult. They move with you because they share your views.

“This notion that it is something strange is in the fevered minds of the observers.”

HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLF

The hunters dispatched and the moon rising, Mr. Orchard resumes combining. “I have neighbours who tell me: ‘You’ll get a lot more votes, David, if you’ll just take down those No Hunting signs.’ ”

But he won’t, even if it costs crucial votes in a tight race.

In the trunk of the old Olds he carries a framed poster of a wolf, eyes burning, “Endangered Species” inscribed below. He plans to hang it in his office: sort of a self-portrait.

“There are an awful lot of lone wolves across this country,” he says.

“More than you realize.”

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