



THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Gary Gurbin, MD, MP: To the nation's capital from a small-town general practice

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Residents in the small Ontario town of Kincardine probably had mixed feelings about whom to vote for in last May's federal election.

One of the candidates — the winning one as it turned out — was a well-respected and popular doctor from the town.

"To be honest, I only heard one negative reaction during the campaign — the only reason people voted against him was they didn't want to lose their doctor," says Barbara Fisher, campaign manager for the new Progressive Conservative member of parliament for Bruce-Grey, Dr. Gary Michael Gurbin.

The editor of the local newspaper, Joy Manley, puts it this way: "It's hard for people to change their doctor, but a reason like politics was a good enough one for changing."

Born in Essex (near Windsor) in

1941, Gurbin is a lean, articulate and determined man who expresses himself with a soft-spoken intensity that is impossible to ignore.

Running in this election, he says, was perhaps the only really programmed thing he's ever done. And once he and his wife Mickey agreed it would be a reasonable thing for him to do, there was just no stopping him.

He never had run for any office before, but according to Fisher he had his sights set on winning right from the start. And the decisiveness of his victory left no doubt that Gurbin had more than beginner's luck going for him. He defeated the sitting member, Crawford Douglas, by 7000 votes.

A 1965 graduate of the University of Western Ontario, Gurbin moved to Kincardine (pop. 4100) in 1966 and conducts his general practice at the Kincardine Medical

Centre and the Kincardine and District General Hospital. He lives with his wife and three children — Tracy, 13, Marty aged 11 and Luke, 9 — in a large brick bungalow just a few doors away from the hospital. His hobbies include skiing and sailing, but he's only been sailing once this summer, because politics has just taken over.

"I'm more politically involved than I thought I would be," Gurbin said in a recent interview. "Politics is harder than practising medicine — mainly because I'm not familiar with it."

Although Gurbin only joined the Progressive Conservative party 2 years ago, he helped run two earlier provincial campaigns in 1975 and 1977. He didn't turn his attention to federal politics until after the party's 1976 national leadership campaign. He says he found he was attracted to leader Joe Clark's style



The warm personality of Gurbin's wife, Mickey, was an asset in his campaign, he says.

of leadership, and felt the federal party was an organization he personally could work with.

"Clark lets you do what you can. He takes advantage of a variety of talents and takes from people what they have to provide. This gives more strength to the party because it isn't just focused on one person."

Coupled with the change in party leadership, Gurbin was convinced that the time was right both for a change in the status quo and for the committed action of people like himself.

"My generation has gone through a whole period in Canada with no wars and no depression — we are a generation of people who have grown up without any real distress . . . but the potential for a crisis is there and I would like to help avoid that now, when it is still possible."

Gurbin wrote to Clark, describing his own background and the character of the riding he wished to represent. This overture was followed up by an invitation to visit Ottawa where he could talk to several MPs and decide whether the political life was really for him.

Realistic position

"They gave me a full day in which I met six or seven MPs . . . I got a good range of viewpoints and a realistic position to judge from."

Gurbin decided to go ahead and seek the Conservative nomination,

which he won in October 1977. After that, he began electioneering in earnest, a year and a half before the election was even called.

His experience on the provincial campaigns convinced him he should run a low-key campaign based on small meetings and lots of door-to-door work. Says Fisher: "It was not a marketed campaign, not a commercial one. Right along we had Gary and Mickey out in front. The campaign never had a machinelike atmosphere, and people never had the impression that Gary was just another spoke in the wheel. People felt he was someone they could trust.

"You just can't manicure him, but there was no need to anyway."



Familiarizing himself with the political scene has left him little time for one of his great loves — sailing.

Once the election was called, Gurbin worked half days in the office for the first 30 days. During the second 30 days he was out campaigning "a full 24 hours." In the beginning, if he wasn't able to get away from his practice, Mickey would substitute for him, attending meetings or doing some of the door-to-door work.

"My wife was a real asset," admits Gurbin. "Her personality takes the rough edges off my approach. She is easy to get along with and personable."

The personal approach

From the start, Gurbin's campaign was the underdog's. Although he was well-known in the extreme southwestern tip of the riding where Kincardine is located, Bruce-Grey stretches some 250 km north to Tobermory on the end of the Bruce Peninsula, and from Lake Huron in the west beyond Durham in the east. But by putting in many long hours and covering hundreds of kilometres the doctor managed to make a name for himself. "We tried to give people an impression at the personal level," explains Gurbin. "It may not work everywhere, but it worked here."

There were other advantages to all the travelling too. "Although I have been in Kincardine for a while and knew this area, the campaign has really expanded my knowledge. Now I know the other areas here

well too — I know all the villages, the streets . . . Each area has its own personality and disposition.”

To help prepare himself for the inevitable public speaking he would be doing, Gurbin joined the Toastmasters Club in Owen Sound for 6 months, where he learned some of the basic speaking techniques, but he says that even now he isn't a very good speaker.

“I cannot give a prepared speech,” he admits. “If I have something to say, well okay, then I can do an impromptu speech. But I dislike reading a prepared speech.”

Amazing ability

This was something Fisher learned halfway through Gurbin's second attempt at reading a speech written by someone else. At one meeting, Fisher recalls, “we had someone doing the speechwriting, and Gary started in on it, but then canned it halfway through. That was his last prepared speech . . . after than he never gave any more. Everything else was impromptu. He has this amazing ability to store information — his memory cells must be 150% more active than anyone else's.”

For Gurbin, one of the most trying aspects of the campaign was having to give up medicine.

“A political campaign is not productive,” he said. “Digging a ditch might be easier. In a political campaign there is no gauge of whether or not you are beating your head against a wall. In medicine, you have a sure sense of accomplishment and fulfilment.”

The election was quite a drain on his financial resources, too.

“The loss of work was the main thing, because I still had my overheads of \$2800 a month here (at his office). I still had to pay it, although the campaign funds sure helped.”

By the end of September, Gurbin will give up his medical practice altogether, but he hopes to be able to practise again during the summer. He recently found an apartment in downtown Ottawa and will spend Monday to Friday there and his weekends in Kincardine. Saturday mornings he will be in his riding office in the nearby town of



Though Gurbin feels some sadness at giving up his practice he looks forward to having a voice in government.

Paisley. Gurbin says the change in his way of life will take some getting used to.

“It is a different kind of pace . . . it's a real adjustment. I'm used to doing things and getting a reaction in medicine. You get less of a reaction in politics.”

Although the experience has been demanding for him, Gurbin wouldn't try to dissuade other doctors from running for office too.

“I wouldn't tell them not to run,” he explains, “but I would try to give them an opportunity of seeing what it is like before they got into it. I would try to help them understand it, but not try to influence their decision. You have to have your own convictions, or you would be unhappy in the transition.”

Since the first week in July, Gurbin has been a member of the Prime Minister's committee on energy, which has been working to

formulate a national policy on energy selfsufficiency. With Ontario Hydro's Bruce nuclear plant within sight of the town of Kincardine and the jobs it created having brought a boom to the local economy, the energy issue is bound to be one Gurbin feels strongly about.

“I have been unhappy about some comments of some medical people regarding nuclear energy,” says Gurbin. “I would be very unhappy to see medical associations take any stand without being able to compare the relative assets and liabilities of nuclear energy with other forms of energy production.”

In Gurbin's opinion, Ontario's economy must have nuclear power if it is going to prosper. “You have to decide if you want to walk to work or if you want to drive and whether or not you have a TV set.

“I'd like to see Jane Fonda walk to Washington.” ■