

New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal

Green candidate ready to rock 2006 election

Friday, December 30, 2005

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Section: News

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Erik Millett is bringing his punk rock sensibilities to the federal election campaign, calling Trudeau a sellout, discussing the need for a great Canadian singer-songwriter and reflecting on being arrested... twice.

The Green Party candidate in New Brunswick Southwest says punk music and politics are a long-standing partnership and that both have become important parts of his life.

"Politics have really fascinated me ever since my high school years, I guess, from my early interest in punk music," Mr. Millett said in an interview at a St. Stephen restaurant.

In the early 1990s he gravitated toward the Green Party because it represented not only his political philosophies but also encompassed his views on big picture issues from the environment to human rights.

"It's not just a political party, it's a social movement, it's a cause that I think is at the centre and core of everything that we do in terms of how we live," he said.

Mr. Millett was born in Truro, N.S., and grew up in Saint John. He's studied French in Quebec and international human rights at Carleton University in Ottawa. In between he travelled the globe with Canada World Youth, an international exchange program that planted issues such as the independence of East Timor into his social conscience.

He's followed that interest to work in Asia and, with a youth group called Katimavik, throughout Canada.

The arrests happened in the 1980s in Ottawa when Mr. Millett was a student protester. He was exercising civil disobedience - once at an arms conference and once at a First Nations protest against low-level flights over Labrador.

"There's many ways to be political," Mr. Millett said of the experiences and of his wish that more Canadians would stand up, even go to jail, for their beliefs.

Mr. Millett returned to New Brunswick in 2000 to complete an education degree at St. Thomas University and a master's degree at the University of New Brunswick. He's now a vice-principal at Milltown Elementary School in St. Stephen.

His political values formed early, and not just from the influence of music. Mr. Millett's first job was as a paper carrier for the Telegraph-Journal and through that he got a glimpse into the world of labour

relations and union activism. In the late 1970s, the Saint John and District Labour Council, including Mr. Millett's father, got involved in the first attempt in Canada to unionize paper carriers. The drive failed.

"It was kind of a character-forming experience," Mr. Millett said.

If he never had to work again, Mr. Millett said he'd volunteer full-time for the Green Party. In fact, when he gets his student loans paid off he'd like to turn his school administration job into a half-time effort and spend the rest of his time helping the Greens establish a stronger presence in New Brunswick.

"After the federal election, there's a group of us who will be turning our attention toward forming a provincial Green Party," he said.

But even a Green guy like Mr. Millett can't be all politics all the time. In his downtime, he takes in artsy and foreign movies with the St. Andrews Film Society, plays volleyball, curls and mountain bikes. In the summer he gets to a half-dozen music festivals.

"Supporting live Canadian music is really important," he said.

"Musicians and artists are very good at being a mirror to us."

His favourites include Fred Eaglesmith, Woodie Guthrie and Billy Bragg, the British punk who evolved into a singer-songwriter while maintaining his sneer toward capitalism and conservative politics.

"He's been able to kind of stay current and evolve but still has held true to his message," Mr. Millett said.

That's unlike another guy Mr. Millett could have admired - Trudeau. Pierre Trudeau was a founder of Katimavik and a world traveler with radical experiences in union politics - traits Mr. Millett admired... until he sold out and became prime minister.

With the Greens, Mr. Millett believes he's found the social and political movement that will allow him to hold on to his principles "without having to sell out the way Trudeau had."

If any of this sounds odd, good. Mr. Millett likes to challenge people and he advises everyone to challenge themselves, to break free of routine or to try something they think they can't do or can't do well.

"If you asked me when I was 18, would I be running for the Green Party in a federal election, probably the answer would have been no."

Yet politics kind of makes sense since the people Mr. Millett admires most are revolutionaries and world changers like David Suzuki, Noam Chomsky, Che Guevara and Mahatma Gandhi. They're all people, Mr. Millett says, "who have had a vision and a passion and who often at great personal expense have pursued that vision."

He worked with a Nobel Peace Prize winner, Jose Ramos-Horta, the foreign minister during the independence struggle in East Timor.

"He was up against Indonesia, an Asian tiger economy, and the United States. And East Timor, this little tiny island country, won against great odds," Mr. Millett said.

And that's what Mr. Millett admires - the underdog, the little guy. He's the Green candidate in a riding that in 2004 voted overwhelmingly Conservative blue, the paperboy who couldn't join a union, the principal with punk rock principles.

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