

Audrey McLaughlin

Yukon's Member of Parliament

by Liz McKee

Cet article découle d'une entrevue avec Audrey McLaughlin, Députée du Yukon et ex-chef du Nouveau parti démocratique.



Photo: Steve Zaleschuk

Audrey McLaughlin was well known in the Yukon long before she became known throughout Canada as the leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP), the first woman to head a federal political party in this country.

When Audrey first came to the Yukon in 1979, she was impressed with the spirit of women here and the diversity of their work and ambitions. "I'm not sure that in the Yukon there are any non-traditional jobs," she says. "I know women who have been truck drivers, miners, diamond drillers, doctors, lawyers, housewives, and politicians as well. They're all traditional jobs!"

When Audrey decided to run for politics, many people told her that

was a nice ambition but they didn't hold out much hope for her in "tough guy country." No one thought Yukoners would ever elect a woman.

Audrey points out, however, that the second woman ever to sit in the House of Commons—Martha Louise Black—came from the Yukon. There have been women mayors, a woman commissioner, and women in all levels of politics over the generations. The problem is, women have generally been written out of history.

"People forgot the Martha Louise Blacks of this world," says Audrey.

Drawing on her own resourcefulness, Audrey didn't overlook the example of other women before her and she began her own fight against the general perception that women couldn't win in politics, regardless of their qualifications.

Audrey also had a number of friends and acquaintances who stood firm in their desire to have a woman MP. This, in the first instance, is why Audrey decided to run. A number of women came to her and said they would support her. That was in 1987 when Audrey had just returned from a six month stint with Crossroads International.

Those same women were organizers and fundraisers in subsequent elections and for her leadership bid for the federal NDP.

"That's not to say there weren't men involved. But I think it's fair to say that women really were the driving force. We had certain ideas of what we wanted to see accomplished in politics and I've tried to carry out those ideas. I feel a great commitment to the people who have been supportive of me."

Although some of the women who helped get Audrey's political life on the rails have left the Yukon, many remain and she continues to look to them for support.

These same women, says Audrey,

are most of the ones who are active in the community in many aspects, not just in terms of politics. They are involved in the business community, the Victoria Faulkner Women's Centre, the *Optimist* (a local feminist newspaper).

Audrey has a reputation for being a steady and committed worker on behalf of Yukon people. Her friendships span cultural boundaries. She tells the story of how she met Margaret Commodore, a respected territorial politician.

"In the early 80s there was a vacancy in one of the territorial ridings and I thought I might run in that election. Then someone who at the time I hadn't known well, Margaret Commodore, also thought of running there. It was obviously a good seat for her because the riding included a large Aboriginal population. I stepped back and said, 'o.k., if you run, I'll work on your campaign.'" She did. She won and she's been an MLA now for at least a decade.

"She in turn, has been one of my strongest workers in my campaigns to be MP and was a strong lobbyist on my behalf when I became leader. "We did a little two for one there!"

Audrey has seen changes in women's lives in the Yukon over the past 15 years. The first rural transition home was opened, the gay and lesbian community is much more visible and more accepted than it was, the *Optimist* continues to be a viable newspaper with a lot of volunteer help, child care openings have increased.

"But I think that sometimes we take two steps forward and one step back," she says. "Women are not part of the focus of history and so many women I know are saying we have to write our own history. I think we are going to see a phase of that—where people are going to tell our story, in our terms."¹

Audrey's world is politics and people. She doesn't distinguish much between her personal and working time. Meeting people is the enriching and rewarding part of politics. This summer, for example, she was a caddie in the Peter Gzowsky golf tournament in Dawson City to raise funds for literacy.

She also had a night "off" at Diamond Tooth Gerties while she was in Dawson—but she worked too. When she was in the gambling hall, she met a government official who was there with a group of Russian geologists so she talked with them. In the same evening, she also met several directors of a gold mining company that's opening in the Dawson area. They were all from Toronto and wanted to talk to Audrey about their mining company and the issues they were dealing with. It's these kinds of events that blur the line between public and private life, but for Audrey, it's part of the life she has chosen.

Commenting on the relatively new Women's Studies program at Yukon

College, Audrey says it should be part of the core curriculum. It's not there yet, but she gives women in the community the credit for getting the program started.

Audrey takes the Yukon distances in stride. She tries to get to all Yukon communities at least twice a year, in the summer and in the school year period. She likes to visit schools and talk about the Canadian Parliamentary system with students.

She gets home from Ottawa as much as she can. After a 12 hour flight, she doesn't just drop in for the weekend very often, but she has done even that. She also uses the telephone to keep in touch with constituents. Her philosophy is that politics is about problem solving and building bridges between people—something that is getting more difficult to do in a society that is becoming in some ways more individualistic and "American."

"It's really important to have people in politics who really believe that by doing things together, we can accomplish a great deal for everyone.

Freedom is really about having freedom from the stress of not having a health care system or the stress of poverty, or not having a job."

Audrey is as much 'at home' jiggling in Old Crow, the most northern community in the Yukon and the home of the Vuntut Gwichin First Nation, as she is attending the Commissioner's Levee in Whitehorse. She is a people's politician who does her homework and serves her constituents. She is admired and respected by Yukoners of all kinds. Audrey McLaughlin will not be written out of Yukon history.

¹Refer to *Our Land, Too—Women of Canada and the Northwest 1860-1914*, (Yukon Government Women's Directorate, 1992).

Liz McKee is a plain language consultant and editor with RumKee Productions in Whitehorse—her own company.

RURAL AFRICA

a special issue

SAGE: A Scholarly Journal
on Black Women

Funded by the USA for Africa Foundation

This issue includes ■ photographic essay ■ profile of Kenyan artist ■ interviews with professional women ■ listing of research centers on women ■ essays on rural development

\$15 Individual ■ \$25 Institution
for 2-issue subscription
\$8 for the current Science issue.

SAGE, P.O. Box 42741
Atlanta, GA 30311-0741

THE OPTIMST

A VOICE FOR YUKON WOMEN



**A quarterly newspaper by women,
for women, about women.**

Celebrating our 20th anniversary in 1994!

Recent themes include:

- women's politics
- disabilities
- pioneering women
- poverty
- censorship
- health

*One of the longest-running feminist publications
in Canada today!*

Subscribe today. \$7.00 individuals, \$12.00 institutions.

The OptiMSt
Box 31011, Main Street P.O.
Whitehorse, Yukon Y1A 5P7