

WITH Danielle Smith, *Leader of the Wildrose Alliance Party*



Danielle Smith, leader of Alberta's Wildrose Alliance party, is a believer in the power of free enterprise to drive the economy and "high performance government" to deliver essential social services cost effectively and with maximum value. Until recently, Danielle was the Director of Provincial Affairs for Alberta with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. She worked with all levels of government to represent the CFIB's small business members. Before CFIB, Smith was an editorial writer and columnist at the Calgary Herald and host of Global Sunday. Early in her career, Smith spent a year with the Fraser Institute as an intern, tried her hand at elected office as a trustee for the Calgary Board of Education and worked in advocacy as director of the Alberta Property Rights Initiative and the Canadian Property Rights Research Institute. Danielle Smith received a B.A. in English and a B.A. in Economics from the University of Calgary. She was named one of Calgary Inc. Magazine's Top 40 under 40 in 2004. She was interviewed after her Lunch on the Frontier speech in Winnipeg on November 22, 2010.

Frontier Centre: What is the proper role of government?

Danielle Smith: The proper role of government is to protect our individual freedoms. It's main purpose is to protect our freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom of association and economic freedom which is principally protecting private property rights. To me that's the first job of government.

FC: Why do you believe in the importance of property rights as the basis for a successful and prosperous society?

DS: Property rights are the foundation of economic freedom. If you don't have economic freedom you are not going to create and invest in a climate that is going to be attractive to entrepreneurs, that will allow for businesses to be established, that will allow for people to have well paying jobs and take care of themselves and their families and their communities. Property rights, to me, are the number one foundation on which to build a successful and prosperous economy.

FC: What do you say to those experts who say a political party cannot be ideological and that the Wildrose Alliance Party will have to put practical water into its free enterprise wine?

DS: There is a practical reality. I take the view that you can only go as far in politics as the people are willing to go with you. My job as a politician is to persuade people that my vision for Alberta is the right one. If I'm successful in persuading them then they will vote for us and they will continue our agenda but you can't proceed ahead without the will of the people behind you. So I respect what Ernest Manning used to call the "common sense of the common people" and I know what my job is -- it's to make sure that whatever it is that we propose passes the democratic test of the people.

FC: When you say that your party will allow competition within the publicly funded health system what do you mean?

DS: What we mean is that as long as public insurance is publicly administered and as long as we have public funding it shouldn't really matter whether or not the service is

delivered at a public facility, a non-profit facility or a private facility. In fact, having this split between the purchaser and the provider is absolutely essential to making sure that you have proper competition and proper accountability in the system which will ensure greater efficiency and better performance.

FC: How would you bring Medical Savings Accounts to Alberta?

DS: We would negotiate with the federal government to attempt to get tax free contributions into a Medical Savings Account. They're already well established in the country with a number of small businesses but the main way in which people will embrace them is if they can contribute before-tax dollars into these accounts so that they're able to pay for services that aren't currently covered whether they're non-insured services or whether it's paying for long term care. We think it's an essential first step to manage their own healthcare, to be able to access some of the preventative measures that currently aren't covered in healthcare and to bring that all important patient centred focus into the healthcare system that is missing right now.

FC: You mentioned the concept of high-performance government in your speech. What is that?

DS: High-performance government is a concept of how we can move to delivering social services in a way that allows us to be able to continue to meet the needs that, I think, most Albertans want which is to take care of their friends and neighbours who can't support themselves but to do so in a way that's going to be more efficient. Right now we have a system where we just continue to dump more and more money and get worse and worse results. I think it's possible for us to be able to restrain the amount of increases in spending and get better and better performance. The way you do that is by allowing for more front line staff to be able to make decisions so that they can find the efficiencies and improve performance in the delivery across a whole range of social programs. It's the biggest challenge we're going to face over the next decade.

FC: You've been criticized on your position on man-made global warming. What is that position and why do you hold it?

DS: I didn't think it would be controversial to say that the science isn't settled but apparently it was a controversial position. I think it's a neutral position. I think it's quite clear from looking at the scientific debate that there is a robust debate in the scientific community about the extent to which man-made emissions are impacting the climate. As a politician I think it's important for us to keep an open mind, for us to monitor the scientific debate and for us to take reasonable measures to be able to address overall emissions. Our natural gas strategy is one that addresses the whole range of environmental emissions including real pollutants like SO₂ and NO_x and in particular matters of mercury and I think that's a far more balanced way of approaching this issue of environmental air quality.

FC: How does one make populism square with the realities of leadership?

DS: It's always tricky to find a way to be able to make sure that you're staying on track with your principles, your policies and being consistent while also making sure that you balance that against democracy. I don't see them being at odds with one another. I've challenged some of my Libertarian friends to point to a jurisdiction where they have no democracy and perfect freedom and of course no one's been able to point to that. To me they seem to be mutually reinforcing and the best way you can ensure democracy and liberty, I think, is through local decision making. I like the example of Switzerland, for instance, where you actually have a great deal of decision making made through direct democracy. So the individual cantons are able to determine the character and priorities of their own communities. I think that kind of approach makes an awful lot of sense and it's something I would certainly want to look at considering for Alberta.

FC: Canada's transfer system program, particularly equalization, has been increasingly criticized in various corners of the country. What's your general view?

DS: In Alberta, I think our population generally supports the basic concept of equalization of making sure that all provinces are able to enjoy roughly equivalent programs for roughly equivalent tax rates. What they don't like is the over-equalization that's happening right now. The fact is that provinces like Alberta, Ontario and British Columbia are disproportionately paying into a system that allows have-not recipient provinces to enjoy a higher level of social spending and social programs than that enjoyed in the have provinces. That's what has to be addressed.

FC: How would you look at a better system going forward?

DS: I think that you can address that in only one way which is that Ottawa has to take less, there has to be a transfer of tax points so that individual provinces are able to raise their own source revenue locally and we can get away from this dependence on the Ottawa tax and transfer scheme.

FC: Saskatchewan's planning to dismantle its Human Rights Commission and use the Courts as was previously done. Would a Wildrose government reform or remove them in Alberta?

DS: Our members have given us a mandate to go forward with revising the legislation that governs Human Rights

Commissions to make it unequivocally clear that free speech is protected and that the Human Rights Commissions do not have the power to be the arbiter of political correctness. That being said, we'll watch the Saskatchewan experiment with interest and see whether or not that would be the kind of approach that we would want to take in Alberta. I can tell you that there are a huge amount of complaints about the Human Rights Commissions and their excessive power in Alberta and I think the case needs to be made about why we continue to need to have this independent tribunal. If the Courts are better able to handle these kinds of issues then that's something we'll have to take a look at considering in Alberta. We'll watch and see how this Saskatchewan approach plays out.

FC: It's interesting that you come from a public policy or think tank background. Why do think tanks play an important role in molding the public dialogue?

DS: Think tanks are essential in providing, I think, the foundation for policy that political parties may not be able to generate themselves. Political parties, especially small ones like ours, we don't have the whole range of resources to be able to do a great deal of independent research on our own and we rely on think tanks to be able to do a lot of that groundbreaking research for us. If you don't have an independent system of think tanks then when you form government you become reliant on your bureaucracy as being the sole policy generator for you. I think we've seen from public choice theory that bureaucracies act in their own interests and you don't necessarily get the full range of options available to you if you go to the internal bureaucracy for those solutions. So it's absolutely essential that you have outside, independent research that's able to look at evidence from around the world and give a broader range of perspective about what the policy solutions are.

FC: Do you have any politicians that you admire and use as a role model?

DS: The politicians I admire most won't surprise you. Margaret Thatcher, I've read both of her auto-biographies. I've read Ronald Reagan's auto-biography. I liked early Klein. I think Klein lost his way a bit in his early years but his first term really put Alberta back on the map. In some ways Gordon Campbell, he has done some good reforms in British Columbia but again I think in the last few years he's lost his enthusiasm for reform. Our challenge ahead of us for the next 20 years is going to be to undo some of the thinking that we fell into during the last decade. I think there's going to be a lot of politicians who emerge with that same drive to be able to have the pendulum swing back the other way. So hopefully there will be a lot more politicians over the next decade that I can put on that list.

FC: Will you remain a conviction politician?

DS: I think that's the only way I know how to be. Every job that I've had has been one where I've been able to actually express myself freely with what I truly believe whether it was in the think tank world when I was at the Fraser Institute, the public policy advocacy world and property rights advocacy, whether it was in the media, whether it was as a lobbyist and now as a politician. Seems to me that if I can't get elected on the things that I believe in and I can't

convince Albertans that the policies we're putting forward are the right ones then maybe politics isn't for me. I'm not willing to throw in the towel yet. I think the job of a politician is to be persuasive, to put forward the best argument and to bring people along with them so that we can actually have a meaningful and intelligent discussion about what the proper role of government is and on what the best public policy options are. I'm finding that Albertans are really not that ideological. What they really want is to try things that work. It just so happens that often the things that work the best

are the things that go back to the classical Liberal values that I happen to believe in -- decentralized decision making, local governance in allowing for a very limited role for government, for government to actually make the case that it needs to have a role, for a government that sets the rules of the game and for me it's a belief that the democratic process is the way to sort these things out. That's what we're campaigning on and hopefully we'll be able to earn the trust of Albertans and win the next election on that.