

MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA

Caroline Cochrane, Canada's only female premier, defies labels—and anyone who doubts her

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Cochrane has been labelled progressive yet pragmatic, which she credits to her life experience and simply being a woman in politics: 'We do think differently ... Not better. Just differently.'

In early 2015, Caroline Cochrane sat at her kitchen table in Yellowknife to read the local newspaper with her partner, Rory, by her side. She was then the CEO of the Centre for Northern Families, a daycare that serves vulnerable women and families in the Northwest Territories' capital. Keeping up with the latest news was part of her routine.

A public service announcement caught Cochrane's eye as she flipped through the pages—an advertisement for a so-called "Campaign School for Women." Its purpose was to provide information and support for novice female candidates looking to enter politics in time for that year's territorial election.

Five years on, Cochrane reflects on that moment, sitting on a brown leather couch in her office—the office of the premier of the Northwest Territories. Looking back at her life, she says politics was hardly on her radar; there was a time when Cochrane was a high school dropout, not even finishing Grade 9. She was homeless at 13, travelling south to Edmonton with a friend to escape alcoholism and abuse in her family home in Yellowknife. "My life was always trying to run away from the North," Cochrane says. "Run away from your issues—that's what people traditionally do."

Cochrane says she would subsist for a few months in Edmonton, only to run out of money and return. Back in Yellowknife, she would make just enough cash at temporary jobs to leave again. It was a revolving door between the North and away. The friend with whom she'd fled when she was 13 would die of a heroin overdose in Edmonton a few years later, and Cochrane became a single mother of two in her later years after the father of her children became involved with drugs. At the time, she was spending her days bookkeeping and her nights bartending to keep the lights on. It's a difficult past that she declines to talk about in detail. But she knew she wanted a change.

Cochrane, now 59, persevered. She signed up for that campaign school five years ago, and today she is Canada's only female premier, after Kathleen Wynne in Ontario and Rachel Notley in Alberta both lost to conservative, white, male opponents. Cochrane, who is Métis, also heads the only gender-balanced legislature in Canada, with nine female MLAs out of 19. Her policies have been labelled progressive yet pragmatic, which she credits to her life experience and simply being a woman in politics. "We do think differently," Cochrane says. "Not better. Just differently."

All of it—the hardscrabble background, the tempered feminism, the suspicion of political dogma—have made Cochrane a unique figure on the Canadian political landscape. The N.W.T. legislature may be non-partisan, and the territory itself a minor player in national politics, but she has already been identified as a potential ally of Justin Trudeau at a time when six provinces representing more than half the country's population are governed by conservative parties.

Her favour will not be automatic: Cochrane recently joined other premiers in an initiative led by Alberta Premier Jason Kenney to have Ottawa revise the federal fiscal stabilization program. Still, in the tradition of the only other woman to hold her office—the formidable Nellie Cournoyea—Cochrane is a territorial leader capable of punching far above her political weight.

The drive to secure a better future for her children was a catalyst for Cochrane, who, after countless nights spent listening to people's troubles while she tended bar, figured she could put her attentive ears to use by becoming a social worker. Without a high school diploma, the transition to academia wasn't easy. Cochrane passed a language proficiency test to be admitted to college, but one major challenge was her limited, street-influenced vocabulary. To expand it, she would jot down words used by her professors at the University College of the Cariboo in Kamloops, B.C. (now Thompson Rivers University). She would then spend her evenings poring over the dictionary, memorizing the meaning and context. It's a habit Cochrane carries on to this day.

After getting her degree in 1999, Cochrane found work in the not-for-profit sector in Yellowknife, helping women and families who faced extreme poverty and lacked access to childcare. It was a two-decade career, during which Cochrane noticed with frustration that the funding her organizations received remained stagnant.

"My partner, very supportive, told me, 'You're smart enough. I'm tired of you complaining all the time. The election's coming up. Run,'" Cochrane recalls. She never took him seriously—until she came across that fateful newspaper ad. Cochrane decided to enrol in the Campaign School for Women, organized by the Northwest Territories' Status of Women Council.

Over a frigid weekend in February 2015, in a stuffy basement conference room at a Yellowknife hotel, she joined a dozen other women eager to kickstart their political careers. One of them was Julie Green, current MLA for Yellowknife Centre. "I've always joked that we were twins,"

Green says of Cochrane—they're the same age, come from the not-for-profit sector, and were the only two women elected to the N.W.T. assembly later that year.

More than opening a door, the course helped Cochrane make sense of an unfamiliar world. Many women, she says, aren't conditioned to ask for what they want, which makes fundraising and door-knocking to rally support from voters difficult.

The course, Cochrane adds, provided necessary training on social media and effective messaging to get her platform across. Still, Green notes, Cochrane's approach to campaigning was slightly different than the conventional. Instead of focusing on reaching as many people as possible during door-knocking trips, Cochrane would be whisked inside potential voters' living rooms, spending 30 minutes or more discussing issues they felt were the most pressing. "She wasn't a big planner," Green says wryly; but Cochrane's approach worked: "It didn't do her any harm, that's the amazing thing. She got to where she needed to go."

Cochrane focused on making homelessness a ballot issue in the 2015 election—focusing so intently on the problem that she didn't expect to win the Yellowknife riding of Range Lake, where she was running against incumbent Daryl Dolynny, a local pharmacist.

But the issue proved resonant. About five per cent of Yellowknife's population uses the city's lone shelter, a sobering figure compared to Toronto's one per cent, or Halifax's 0.5 per cent. After the ballots were counted on Nov. 23, 2015, Cochrane sat five votes ahead of Dolynny, launching her career in politics. She was happy that homelessness in the territories became a paramount issue because of her campaign. Getting elected, Cochrane adds, was a bonus.

She hit the political ground running, taking the helm of seven cabinet portfolios during her first term, including status of women, housing and education. An even bigger surprise came four years later, after her re-election, when she beat three other candidates in three rounds of secret-ballot votes by her fellow MLAs to win the territory's top political job.

Cochrane says her Métis background and personal philosophy taught her to always be humble, so she didn't expect the premiership to be hers until the moment her name was announced. There was not much time for shock, however, as the responsibilities of her new role came into focus. "We will make this next four years the most progressive government in the Northwest Territories," Cochrane declared on election night.

The composition of the new legislature already reflected her assertion—a historic increase in women over the two who sat in the previous assembly. Eleven out of the 19 MLAs are also fresh faces who share an ambitious agenda to cure the territory's poor high school graduation rate of 67 per cent, the lowest in Canada; and a growing housing crisis, where 42 per cent of households in the territory are too expensive for residents, overcrowded or in need of repairs.

The territory is a vast landmass sprawling from the Prairies to the Arctic archipelago, but its population is tiny, with about 44,800 residents. By several key measures of social progress—

educational attainment and housing being just two—it lags behind the rest of the country. Those problems are amplified in smaller communities outside of Yellowknife, with Indigenous populations reeling from residential school trauma, a shortage of school classrooms and poor access to social services. Economically, the territory relies heavily on mining and tourism, but has struggled to get back on its feet since the global recession of 2008. Its average GDP growth since 2014 is under one per cent per year, less than half that of Canada as a whole.

“I always consider ourselves the poor cousins,” Cochrane says. “If you have problems with housing in the south, come and look at our housing. We’ve got 40-below weather out there. People freeze if they don’t have adequate housing.”

That housing and education fall within Cochrane’s wheelhouse is no surprise—she’s experienced them herself, having called the territory home since she was two. But she’s at pains to voice concern about the economy, including maintaining job growth and continued promotion of the territory’s mining sector. The fear of climate change is not lost on her government, she stresses, but—in a talking point that closely echoes Trudeau’s insistence that climate action and a strong economy go hand in hand—she argues a resource-rich region must capitalize on those assets while the government does its part to tackle the global climate crisis.

The N.W.T. may face unique problems, but Cochrane also views the territory as one slice of a 13-piece, Canada-shaped pie. That’s why, at a first ministers’ meeting in December, she signed the letter from Canada’s premiers following the Trudeau government’s narrow re-election in October, asking Ottawa to reassess fiscal stabilization, which provides financial assistance to provinces during economic downturns. The issue has been a thorn in the side of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland and Labrador, who say they’ve paid more than their fair share in equalization, and are now struggling through tough economic times.

Though her territory doesn’t receive stabilization funding, Cochrane signed on anyway. “If I want the premiers to support my needs, I need to support theirs as well,” Cochrane tells Maclean’s. “As long as it doesn’t jeopardize our territory or my ethics and it’s not illegal, then why would I not support you in making sure that you prosper as well?”

Her priority for now, Cochrane says, is ensuring Trudeau moves forward with the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework his government released prior to the 2019 federal election. Its lofty goals include ending poverty, eradicating hunger and eliminating homelessness in the North by focusing on health care funding, infrastructure and economic development. Critics have slammed the framework, however, for its vagueness on how exactly to address these issues.

Cochrane also wants to work collaboratively with the 12 other premiers and facilitate harmony within the federation. There is a lot to agree on, she maintains, despite her differences with much of the group, with their mostly privileged backgrounds and policy goals. “Every premier that I heard is worried about the economy,” she says. “All of us are worried about housing, all of us are worried about childcare. The innate concerns of people go across parties.”

Cochrane figures the instinct to seek common ground comes from her background as one of eight children in a 10-person household. Everyone at the dinner table was given an equal serving for dinner before receiving any seconds, she recalls—a simple philosophy she applies to public policy. “I need my bowl of soup to be able to stay alive, but you need your bowl of soup, as well. So let’s all work together and make sure that all of us come out at the end of the meal with a full belly.”

Still, many of her battles will be lonely ones, as her status as the only woman at a table of 13 premiers demonstrated in December. “Society is a lot more lenient toward male politicians,” she says in her office, four months into her mandate. “Any woman who’s elected has a microscope on them ... People will be coming out from whichever way they can to try to make us fail.”

Later that afternoon, Cochrane stands in the legislature during question period and defends her government’s authority to dismiss the president of Aurora College, Tom Weegar, in the midst of its transition to becoming the territory’s first polytechnic university. Weegar had been hired to lead the transition while Cochrane was education minister, but only worked for 10 months before he was terminated without cause, according to local media. For several minutes, Cochrane tells her fellow MLAs that terminating Weegar’s employment is in her “sole purview” as premier, without providing rationale or justification for the move.

It is the first substantive controversy of her term, made more complicated by her insistence that personnel issues not be aired in the assembly, or in public. Weegar has since spoken out, saying his termination felt like “sabotage” and came “out of the blue.” He has lost confidence in the premier, he said.

Whatever Cochrane’s reasons, and however muddied the issue has grown by her unwillingness to explain, she hasn’t swayed from her stance—or from her ambitious agenda to lift the N.W.T. out of struggles that for decades have plagued much of Canada’s North. It won’t be easy. But Cochrane says she gathers strength from many women behind her—her staff, her fellow MLAs and the women in the territory’s streets and grocery stores.

Together, they serve as a kind of lodestar. Back when Cochrane was status of women minister, she expanded the Campaign School for Women program beyond territorial to municipal politics. It has been going strong ever since, producing six out of the nine current female MLAs. As premier, she’s no less determined to keep women flowing into politics—which means applying no small amount of pressure on herself. “When I was elected as premier, it said to all women throughout the Northwest Territories that you too can be here,” Cochrane says. “It put a lot of responsibility on me, because it meant that I cannot fail.”

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