

2015

Federal Election



CHRIS COLBOURNE/St. Albert Gazette

ECLECTIC CROWD – Volunteer Tash Taylor works the phones at independent MP Brent Rathgeber's campaign office. The former Conservative has attracted supporters from

a wide variety of political backgrounds as he seeks to be re-elected in the St. Albert-Edmonton riding.

MP Brent Rathgeber goes it alone without the big party support

The challenge of independence

BY VICTORIA PATERSON
Special to the Gazette

Notes of encouragement are arriving at Brent Rathgeber's campaign office from across the country and across the political spectrum.

Some of those notes include donations, dollars for an independent's campaign being run without the advantage of a party affiliation.

"It's support for Brent and what Brent stood up for," says campaign manager Bill Holtby.

Holtby is a former St. Albert city manager who began volunteering as Rathgeber's campaign manager last year.

The incumbent MP for the riding, Rathgeber came to the nation's notice when he loudly left the federal Conservative Party caucus in 2013 over changes to a bill he'd tabled. He's kept the limelight by proposing a variety of bills and publishing a book.

Rathgeber's put his trust and political future into the hands of a rookie campaign manager. Holtby hadn't ventured into the world of partisan politics prior to agreeing to run Rathgeber's campaign.

"I'm the sort of person who votes for a candidate, but not a party," Holtby says. He was pleased with Rathgeber's actions in leaving the Conservatives and decided to accept the volunteer role.

That role entails co-ordinating and supporting the campaign team Holtby and Rathgeber started putting together last fall. The team, like Rathgeber's far-flung support from across the country, covers a broad spectrum of political



BRENT
RATHGEBER
Independent

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beliefs.

"We've got an entire cross section of all of the parties sitting at the table," Holtby says of the dozen or so members of the campaign's executive team. They've been attracted by factors such as Rathgeber's independence and a mutual worry over the state of Canadian democracy.

That inner circle includes people like Doug Elniski, a former Progressive Conservative MLA. He was on the Rathgeber's federal Tory constituency association board and resigned from the party the same day as Rathgeber. The pair has been friends for years.

"You've got to be loyal to your friends," Elniski says. He's the "get out the vote" chair for Rathgeber's campaign, and said the campaign team is a strong and robust one.

Elniski says he's seeing "a tremendous amount of support" for Rathgeber in St. Albert.

Other supporters include some whose names were featured in St. Albert on

ballots during this year's provincial and municipal elections.

"I always support people over parties," Ed Ramsden says. Aside from his recent municipal campaign, he's been involved in federal and provincial politics in St. Albert in the past.

He's taken on a background support role, working on identifying voters. He supports Rathgeber because he wants an MP that will represent him. Ramsden doesn't always agree with Rathgeber, but he believes the incumbent MP would consider his constituents' opinions before voting in the House of Commons.

Trevor Love ran for the Alberta Party this spring and is the St. Albert sign chair for this campaign. His reasons for supporting Rathgeber are similar to Ramsden's.

"(Rathgeber) kind of stands for a lot of the same things I stand for ... rather than bringing the message from the government to the people, bringing the message from the people to the government," Love says.

Love says he sees a wide range of political beliefs even within the campaign team.

"I think he's got a fairly wide appeal because of who he is and what he stands for, he's looking to change the way we do government and I think that appeals to a lot of people," he says.

Elniski, Ramsden and Love work on the executive team under Holtby's guidance as campaign manager. The executive team is just the start of the volunteer support. Holtby estimated last week that there are more than 150 volunteers on board so far.

"I'm amazed at the rally of people around Brent and Brent's cause," Holtby says.

Rathgeber says he's never had a team in place so early before an election before, though he said you're still never as organized as you need.

"When (the election) actually gets called, you're still thriving on chaos," he says during an interview in his campaign office last week.

The office itself is a luxury he wasn't sure his campaign could afford even just a few months ago. The early election call in August meant he could start fundraising earlier than expected, and he'd raised more than \$30,000 as of last week. Independent candidates are not allowed to start fundraising until the election call has occurred and they are registered as a candidate.

The team had laid out a few financial scenarios in advance of the campaign beginning in earnest. The money raised so far is enough to pursue a mid-range one.

But it's likely not enough to compete with the Conservative fundraising machine, he said. But that's OK by him - he likes being the underdog.

"They have more money than I could possibly raise ... I'm not going to even try," Rathgeber says.

The money raised personally by Rathgeber's campaign for this election outstrips what his election-time campaign raised in 2011, when he raised \$13,085 in donations. But in that election, and the 2008 one, he was able to get large bumps from his riding association's bank accounts, it shows on Elections Canada financial statements.

It's a campaign filled with firsts for Rathgeber. The first time he couldn't build a war chest with the help of an electoral district association before the election call. The first time he's run without the benefit of a party's infrastructure and branding. The first time he's picked up votes and a volunteer by helping move furniture while campaigning.

The last happened about two weeks ago in Akinsdale when he knocked on a door and was asked to help move a stuck boxspring.

So he did.

"I would say it's harder," he says when asked how this campaign compares to his previous outings as a candidate.

"You've got to do everything yourself," he says. That includes campaign essentials like sign and brochure design, or even picking his colour.

"It's the difference between the sun and the moon," Rathgeber says.

Now, it's him and the volunteers making the decisions and doing the work.

"I like working with volunteer labour," he says, rather than having any paid campaign staff. "They're here because they believe in what they're doing."

Rathgeber doesn't get to run on the strength of a party leader or a platform either, instead having to rely on his own record, ideas and reputation.

Some things are the same - no matter how organized and large your team is or how well fundraising is going, you always need more of both.

Another constant across campaigns is the door knocking. Rathgeber started on the doors a few weeks ago, and is doing one to two shifts every day unless there is a community event to interrupt that schedule. Canvassing door-by-door is a common feature in many campaigns, party candidate or not.

But unlike previous outings, Rathgeber doesn't feel overwhelming support when constituents answer their doors like he did in 2011.

Now, he's scrapping for every potential vote in the riding amidst a federal campaign that so far appears to be a three-way tie between the Conservatives, Liberals and NDP, in a riding where he's running as a "small-c" conservative against long-time Conservative Party member Michael Cooper.

Rathgeber thinks he's maybe getting support from every three and sometimes four houses out of 10.

"Nobody is going to get 50 per cent in this riding ... I think three out of 10 isn't going to do it, I think four out of 10 might," Rathgeber says.

A shot?

"It is very difficult to run as an independent," says Duane Bratt, a political scientist from Mount Royal University in Calgary.

"A lot of voters vote based on the party, based on the national leader, not on the local candidate," he says.

The exceptions to the rule, and there have been a few, have usually already been MPs, Bratt says. That's the case in St. Albert-Edmonton.

"If I was to pick an independent that has a shot, it would be (Rathgeber), but he's still in an uphill battle," he says.

The main advantage to running as a party candidate comes with the platform, Bratt says. The availability of helpful injections of money and infrastructure sometimes comes with a party nomination, but it depends on the party.

That Rathgeber left a party in a high-profile way, has his own ideas and left on a point of principle could be advantages for him, Bratt says.

But there are likely struggles, including losing long-time supporters over leaving the Conservatives.

On the issue of campaign finances, Rathgeber doesn't have a party to count on for money, but Bratt says reforms brought in under former prime minister Jean Chrétien and during Stephen Harper's tenure make money a more level playing field than it used to be.

"The biggest issue (Rathgeber's) dealing with is party allegiance and branding and that's what he has to fight against."

Rathgeber's campaign might be heartened to see messages and donations coming in from across Canada, wishing they could cast a vote for him or an independent candidate like him.

But whether or not that apparent cross-country and cross-spectrum support will be echoed by the voters of St. Albert-Edmonton at the polls won't be seen until the ballots are counted on Oct. 19.

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