

## ANALYSIS

Greens aim for non-environmental buzz



TONY BOCK / TORONTO STAR


Frank de Jong, 51-year-old leader of the Ontario Green party, hopes to get the message out in the weeks leading up to the Oct. 10 election with a tour of the hustings in a minivan powered by biodiesel fuel.

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***'Ontario is becoming a more and more secular province day by day, and we need to modernize our educational system and be fair to everyone'***

**FRANK DE JONG, Ontario Green party leader, on the proposed scrapping of public funding for religious schools**

Will party's opposition to public funding for all religious schools turn Ontario voters' heads?

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Rob Ferguson  
QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU

It's not an environmental issue, and that's the point.

The Green party is hoping its promise to scrap taxpayer-funded religious education in Ontario will be a vote-grabber in the Oct. 10 provincial election.

The proposal – involving a referendum on ending public support for Catholic schools – is one of the top three planks in the Green platform to be released soon, says party leader Frank de Jong, a soft-spoken Toronto public school teacher.

And the school position is sure to get the Greens more attention, given Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory's controversial \$400 million campaign pledge to grant public funding to Jewish, Muslim and other religious schools provided they teach the provincial curriculum.

"I'm glad it's an issue in this campaign," says de Jong, 51, who is running in the west downtown riding of Davenport against veteran Liberal MPP Tony Ruprecht.

The NDP candidate is Peter Ferreira; the Conservatives are running Antonio Garcia.

"I think John Tory is retrograde in his approach and the status quo is untenable," de Jong adds in a wide-ranging interview at a College St. W. restaurant, his bicycle parked outside.

"Ontario is becoming a more and more secular province day by day, and we need to modernize our educational system and be fair to everyone."

With the Liberals and New Democrats in favour of leaving the public and Catholic systems as they are, de Jong (pronounced de Young) is looking to widen the appeal of a party that has never elected a candidate.

With support at 6 per cent in recent opinion polls, the Greens are wise to attempt a breakout from their public perception as a party solely concerned about the environment, says John Wright, senior vice-president at polling firm Ipsos-Reid.

"By taking on the school issue, they automatically broaden their base," adds Wright, who notes the Greens seem to poll highest in the London area – about 10 per cent – where federal party leader Elizabeth May came second to the Liberals in a federal by-election last December.

"The school issue could be decisive in the campaign."

But not likely for the Greens, say Wright and University of Toronto political science professor Nelson Wiseman.

While the federal Green party and its high-profile leader have attracted some buzz, de Jong and his Ontario party aren't having as much success.

"He's not gaining altitude," Wiseman says of de Jong, whom he characterizes as "bright and articulate."

At least one environmental group agrees the provincial Green party is too low key.

"Someone needs to get in there and drive," says Dan McDermott of the Sierra Club of Canada, Ontario Chapter.

"What does it cost to put out a press release?"

De Jong says it would help if Ontario's campaign financing laws were changed to match federal laws so that parties would get public funding based on the number of votes they receive. His federal counterpart May, he notes, gets paid.

"I should be, but we've preferred to employ other people to run the campaign."

The party is hoping to raise \$500,000 to get its message out in the weeks leading up to the Oct. 10 vote, with plans for a province-wide leader's tour in a minivan

powered by biodiesel fuel, says de Jong, who is taking a six-week leave of absence from his half-time job teaching design technology.

The second major plank is using financial incentives to encourage green behaviour, shifting taxes on personal income toward taxes on fossil fuels like oil, gas and coal – which produce the greenhouse gases that cause global warming – to discourage their use.

De Jong's plan is to shift \$2 billion a year in taxation that way, an issue he plans to make "front and centre" in the campaign.

"We can address climate change without government spending one penny," he contends.

"It won't be government micro-management; it will be the invisible green hand doing the work for us ... we need to get the market in line with our philosophy of the Earth."

The Sierra Club believes market mechanisms are a "good tool" but are only part of a solution that requires more activist lawmaking and regulation given the threats the planet is facing.

"The market makes a good servant, a poor master and a worse religion," says McDermott. "To rely on market mechanisms alone to get the job done I don't think will get the job done."

The last of the top three issues for the provincial Greens involves pushing for more local and organic agriculture, which de Jong says could be accomplished by restoring the 8 per cent provincial sales tax on farm fuels and pesticides.

He argues the measures would encourage farmers to grow organically and send their products to local markets, fuelling the environmentalists' push for a "100-

mile diet," under which consumers try to eat foods grown nearby to reduce the greenhouse gases produced by shipping.

But selling those policies to an electorate skeptical of all politicians will be a challenge, Wiseman says, especially given the recent Liberal announcement that former federal Green executive council member Kate Holloway has defected.

She is running for Premier Dalton McGuinty's team in the central Toronto riding of Trinity-Spadina against long-serving New Democrat MPP Rosario Marchese. Running for the Tories is Tyler Currie.

"If you can't even keep your activists, how are you going to get voters?" asks Wiseman.

With the election less than eight weeks away, de Jong says the party has nominated about half the 107 candidates it needs to field a full slate in every riding across the province – something it plans to do in the coming weeks.

The Greens won 2.8 per cent of the popular vote in the 2003 election.