Anders has his detractors, but he wins when it counts

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CALGARY'S EYE ON THE FEDERAL ELECTION

This column started over dinner with a couple of committed Calgary Conservatives who were weighing who to back in the federal election: the Liberals or the Greens.

Finally it was decided — the Green party would get their vote, as it had the previous election.

Die-hard Tories, they couldn't support the Liberals. And they wouldn't support their MP, Calgary West incumbent Rob Anders.

Their quandary doesn't appear unique.

An MP since 1997, the 33-year-old Anders wins elections by several thousand votes, yet to many inside the Conservative network — both federally and provincially — he's bad news.

It's not just the high-profile moments of extreme silliness, though those can't be denied.

The most talked about incident came when Anders was the only MP to refuse to endorse honorary Canadian citizenship for former South African president Nelson Mandela.

But that was 2001, several years ago, right? The foolishness of a young hothead finding his political feet.

There were other moments supporters dismiss as youthful indiscretions, the likes of which won't be repeated. Like when he was a hired heckler in Oklahoma. Or when he was sued over a letter that slagged Ron Ghitter for criticizing the Alberta Tories' record on discrimination against gays.

A number of his fellows in Calgary wish the guy's political career would end.

Privately, of course. No one wants to bash an incumbent Conservative MP, especially at this stage of the election campaign.

But it verges on amazing, the venom directed his way, of which "embarrassment" is about the kindest. Anders puts it down to his unbending views, which tend to the rigid right.

"I'm a conservative's Conservative," said Anders. "When people vote for Rob Anders, they know they're getting a very Blue Tory."

That is part of the problem. Anders is seen as among the least progressive of the conservatives Stephen Harper needs in the big tent if he is to successfully govern Canada.

Anders is the young face of the old Reform partyers — the socially immobile set that helped stall the conservative movement for years.



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Some Conservatives may not agree with Rob Anders' views, but the Tory MP keeps winning elections.

So if some of his colleagues wish him gone, how does Anders stay so convincingly on top?

According to both friend and foe, he's a terrific organizer.

He reportedly lives for his job as an MP, and even has a so-called demon dialer in his home — a machine that fires off automated telephone messages to constituents.

Anders hooks new supporters with single-issue bait, in a process that works something like this:

A mail-out survey goes to, say, 1,000 households in Calgary West with a hot issue: gun registry, same-sex marriage, Quebec.

The responses are broken down. This group is opposed to homosexual marriage, this pile think the gun registry is crap and these folks want Quebec to go to hell.

A bit later, an Anders volunteer follows up with the survey respondent, telling them their man in Ottawa is particularly concerned with gun control/Quebec/same-sex marriage, depending on which pile their name's been pulled from.

The constituents are thrilled by the like-minded representation. They're invited to join the Anders camp, which they generally do. Once onboard, they typically stay.

Smart politics, yes. Manipulative? Maybe.

It works at the nomination level, too. Before the 2004 vote, Anders faced Alison Redford for the right to run for the federal party.

Redford had backing from provincial Tories and disgruntled federal Progressive Conservatives who resented their party's merger with the Alliance.

Anders took it 1,390 votes to 1,054.

"Alison was an outstanding candidate," said Calgary West MLA Ron Liepert, Redford's campaign manager for the nomination. "But at the end of the day, Rob Anders won. I was surprised he could pull out as many supporters as he did."

Federal Liberal candidate Jennifer Pollock is trying to capitalize on anti-Anders sentiment, but she isn't the answer because the Liberal Party of Canada isn't the answer.

Calgary West will ignore Pollock's call, and Anders will win handily again on Monday.

The next chance his detractors will have to boot him out of office will be nomination day for the 2010 national election.

Forget supporting the Liberals, New Democrats or Greens.

Calgary West conservatives who want a new face to represent them need to find a candidate, build a machine, then get more voters out than Anders does on nomination day.

So far, no one's been able to.

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