



Search for something meaningful

Christine Elliott embodies volunteer spirit in a political life

BY JASON WINDERS, MES'10

She does not see the point of running without a destination. "You must have a reason for running besides wanting to be an MP or MPP," said Christine Elliott, LLB'78. "There are lots of ups and downs in elected office, and you very seldom get what you want. So, you really have to have your eyes on something that is meaningful to be successful."

From her earliest days at Western, Elliott has found meaning in service to others. And today, that drive which pushed her to rapid success on campus may lead her to the top of her party charged with renewing – and rebranding – its future.

A bright, energetic and focused student, the Oshawa-born Elliott arrived at Delaware Hall with a couple of futures in mind.

"I was torn when I came to university. I either wanted to be an archeologist or a lawyer," the Whitby-Oshawa MPP laughed. "I remember my father saying to me, 'Well, Christine, why don't you think about law and then have archeology and anthropology as a hobby. It doesn't work that well the other way around!'"

She followed that advice and eyed law from the moment she arrived. J.J. Talman, the respected historian and chief librarian, helped guide her into early admission into Western



Law, which she entered after second year. She was among the youngest in her class at 20 years old.

"In some ways, I wish I had gotten an undergraduate degree and been a little bit older and, maybe, I would have had more life experience," she said. "But I learned a lot – really quickly."

After graduation, she practised law, as well as worked as a senior investigator for the province's ombudsman. There, she developed an interest in mental health law and issues. "That stayed with me as I got into politics," she said.

She admits public service was always the plan. Almost immediately after getting married in 1986, Elliott and her husband, the late former federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, decided to get involved in political life beyond simply supporting candidates. Someone in the family was going to run for office.

"And originally," Elliott said, "it was me that was going to run."

In 1989, the couple returned to Whitby, where her parents were well-established in local Conservative politics. The political supports were in place to begin her run, she thought.



MPP Christine Elliott — arriving at a news conference in late June to announce her run for the leadership of the PC party — says she is “a lot tougher than people think.” (Richard J. Brenna/Canadian Press)

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“But I was a complete neophyte,” she laughed. “I had no idea how to go about becoming a candidate — neither did Jim.”

With an established candidate already in Durham Centre, she was too late to run in the 1987 provincial general election. By the time then-Premier David Peterson called for an election just three years into his mandate, Elliott was onto another adventure.

“At that point,” she said, “I discovered I was expecting triplets. That’s when Jim decided he would seek the nomination. Things kind of stayed that way and I was a ‘political spouse’ for 10 years.”

Flaherty lost his initial election in 1990, ran again and won in 1995. He

served provincially until 2005. When he vacated his seat to run in the 2006 federal election, Elliott stepped up.

“I approached that first race from my position as a volunteer,” she said. “Having worked with people facing mental health challenges, as well as being the chair of our local children’s health treatment centre, I wanted to do something to help vulnerable people. That’s why I decided to get involved and try and do something at the provincial level.”

She won the by-election in 2006. Since, she has been reelected three times — most recently last year.

Even from an opposition position, she has found “meaningful” pursuits. She moved a pair of private member’s bills — one on mental health, one on developmental issues — which met with nonpartisan success. The former informed changes to mental health services and support in the province; the latter led to a government commitment of \$800 million to build services and supports for people with developmental issues.

“It wasn’t any one, single party, but all three parties coming to the same conclusion,” she said. “That has been the most meaningful work I have done in a political sense at Queen’s Park — over and above what you try and do for your constituents. That is the reason you get elected in the first place — to represent your constituency. But you want to do something to improve all people’s lives.”

Today, Elliott is bidding at something her revered husband never accomplished — serve as Ontario Progressive Conservative (PC) Party leader. On May 9, the PCs will eye a replacement for former leader Tim Hudak, BA’90, who oversaw a second straight defeat for the Tories last summer.

“We had very disappointing results in the elections. We need to let people know what we are about as a party,” Elliott said. “We talked a lot about fiscal conservatism in the last election — that is the bedrock. We need to be careful about the way we spend money and what our priorities are. To me, our priorities are being socially compassionate and helping vulnerable people. We have a social responsibility to do that.

“Those are the things I want to talk about. Those are the historic roots of our party — fiscal conservatism and social compassion. We don’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

Flaherty lost both his 2002 and 2004 leadership bids. Elliott lost her first effort to Hudak in 2009.

“I pushed myself in the last leadership beyond my comfort zone,” she said. “I have always been naturally shy, but you cannot do that when running for office, and certainly not when running for leadership. I learned it’s not reluctance; it’s just a style. It’s who I am and I am quite confident moving forward.”

No matter the results, Elliott said, she understands her mission remains the same.

“I see my job as an extension of the volunteer I was in the community,” she said. “Government has a role in that — but it doesn’t have to be all things to all people. Government can empower communities to help their citizens. I believe very strongly in the power of volunteers, the power of community to create change for people.”