

Guarnieri reveling on government benches

Veteran Liberal reflects on first nine months of Parliament

By JOHN STEWART
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Albina Guarnieri still has to pinch herself some days to make sure she's not dreaming.

After being a "small red dot" on the political landscape in Peel — as the only Liberal in the region in the last Parliament — she's part of the sea of Grits who swept Ontario in capturing all but one of the province's federal ridings last fall.

In an interview, Guarnieri said the transition from the Opposition benches to the government side has been a challenging one, especially in such an unusual Parliament. The separatist philosophy of the Bloc Québécois and the western viewpoint of the Reform Party have created "a big vacuum in Opposition" says the second-term member.

"Some of our best opposition comes from within our own caucus," she jokes. "We have some great, healthy debates."

After being associate health critic in the last session, Guarnieri admits she was hoping for a job with that ministry when Prime Minister Jean Chrétien handed out the Parliamentary secretaries' jobs at the end of last year.

Parks and aboriginals

She ended up working with Canadian Heritage Minister Michel Dupuy and she couldn't be happier.

"I feel like I've died and gone to heaven," says the Italian-born MP.

Although the portfolio appears to be a grab bag of jurisdictions (culture, sport, parks, non-status aboriginal people, official languages, status of women, secretary of state and multiculturalism), it has worked surprisingly well.

Guarnieri has direct responsibility for parks and aboriginals. The parks' duties are a particular joy for the MP, who confesses to being a marine park junkie.

She's particularly excited about a candidate marine park in the Saugunay River region of Quebec where the population of whales once 5,000 strong has been reduced to 500.

Despite the pressing fiscal restraints that face the government, the Liberals want to add six new parks to the national system by the turn of the century.

Canadians aren't aware of the wonderful system of heritage areas and parks that span the country, she says. "We have to do a better job of selling the country to Canadians" who too often automatically look south for vacation plans. "How many people realize we have

these glorious places?" she says in reference to locations such as the fords of Gros Morne National Park in Newfoundland.

However, national parks are going to have to become more self-sufficient, and that may mean more examples of things such as Gros Morne's \$2 entrance fee. "I don't think people on vacation will begrudge a couple of bucks to help save the whales."

Another message Guarnieri would definitely like to spread about her ministry is that cultural industries are not a fill. Research shows that for every government dollar spent on culture, \$4 is generated for the economy.

In her admittedly biased viewpoint, Guarnieri claims the Liberals



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are turning things around after what she sees as the drift of the politically bankrupt Mulroney years. They have a plan, the "Bible" of the Liberal red book and she says they're going to stick with it.

But it's not easy, especially dealing with the cynicism about politicians and their profession which

permeates public opinion. "I'm really concerned about the lack of faith in our institutions," says the MP, "and especially by the denigration of politicians as dishonest and overpaid. It's not healthy."

"By the end of our mandate, I hope we have restored the political realm to respectability."