

Accidental Lawmaker in Canada Defies Critics, and Liberal Party Resurgence

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OTTAWA — It started as a lark: A party needed somebody, anybody, on the ballot for an unwinnable seat in Quebec, and some friends nominated [Ruth Ellen Brosseau](#), an unknown single mother in her 20s who worked in bars and did not even live anywhere near the district.

Then it was a fluke: She won the seat in 2011 without ever campaigning for it, riding a tide of voter dissatisfaction with the status quo and the last-minute popular appeal of the party's leader at the time, Jack Layton.

Now her story has become an underdog's triumph worthy of a Frank Capra movie: In one of the bigger upsets of the Canadian elections last week, Ms. Brosseau handily won re-election to Parliament, even as her party, the left-leaning [New Democrats](#), took a beating across the country.

The voters had many surprises up their sleeves last week. Instead of the close national race with no clear winner that was forecast by opinion polls, they delivered a sweeping victory and governing majority to [Justin Trudeau](#) and his Liberal Party and ejected incumbents on both the right and the left.

A fair number of those defeated incumbents had been so-called paper candidates like Ms. Brosseau, obscure slate-fillers who lucked into office in 2011 when the New Democrats benefited from voter defections in districts where they never expected to be competitive.

Few of them, though, seized their good fortune with both hands quite the way Ms. Brosseau's supporters say she did. Facing critics in the establishment who sneeringly suggested that she was unfit for office, she studied hard, learned the needs of her constituents and is helping to fight a David-and-Goliath battle for homeowners whose houses are crumbling beneath them. And she made an impression.

"We need more people like her in government," Gérard Jean, the mayor of Lanoraie, Quebec, a town in Ms. Brosseau's district, [told The National Post](#), a newspaper based in Toronto. "She is someone who, because of where she comes from, is really close to people."

Even Ms. Brosseau, now 31, acknowledges that her move into politics was hardly an obvious career choice.

Though Quebec tends to lean leftward, the New Democrats had had very little success there, winning only two seats in the previous 50 years. Still, to be taken seriously as a

national party, it had to field a candidate in every district. So some politically active friends who frequented a bar where Ms. Brosseau worked asked if they could put her name forward.

Far from hitting the campaign trail, Ms. Brosseau went ahead with a long-planned birthday bash with friends in Las Vegas, a trip that later drew mockery in the news media, calling her the “Vegas Girl.”

And after she won anyway — part of a wave of 59 New Democratic candidates in Quebec whose surprise victories were attributed in part to deep dissatisfaction with the separatist Bloc Québécois — her press coverage turned even more scathing, focusing on her having given birth as a teenager and her lack of a college degree. (She started community college but did not finish.) One headline in *The Toronto Sun*, a Conservative-leaning tabloid, declared that Ms. Brosseau “debases politicians.”

Ms. Brosseau tried to ignore the media, reveling instead in her newfound responsibilities and in a lawmaker’s salary that, for her, was an economic windfall. After struggling for years to earn enough to support her son, sometimes working three jobs at a time, she would now get 157,733 Canadian dollars a year (worth about \$150,000 in 2011), not to mention generous benefits and a pension plan.

“Suddenly, my cellphone blew up, my email blew up,” Ms. Brosseau recalled in an interview. “For the first few months, I kind of kept my head down and decided, I’m going to give it all I have got to give.”

It did not help that her mainly rural electoral district was a three-and-a-half-hour drive from her home in the Ottawa suburbs, nor that, as a vegetarian, she had little in common with the many pork- and beef-producing farmers in her constituency.

She credits Mr. Layton, who died a few months after the 2011 election, with helping her through her early days in office, when she was intimidated by her loss of privacy and by the challenge of learning the basics of elective politics on the job.

Mr. Layton assigned Kathleen Monk, his spokeswoman, to be her mentor. He also lent Ms. Brosseau his personal French tutor, to buff up a language that she had little opportunity to use while growing up in Kingston, Ontario, and working in Ottawa, but that she would now need to communicate with most of her new constituents.

Ms. Monk said she was offended by much of the news coverage of Ms. Brosseau. “All kinds of horrific stories were written about her,” Ms. Monk said. “But her story was so much more relatable to most Canadians.”

Ms. Brosseau did her homework. She attended as many public events in her district as she could and held town-hall-style meetings and informal coffees to introduce herself and learn about local concerns.

“I did a lot of everything,” Ms. Brosseau said. “I had to build relationships, and I had to build bridges.”

What probably saved her seat last week, though, while many of her colleagues in Quebec were going down to defeat, was her decision to take on the most local of issues: complaints from homeowners about defective concrete used to build house foundations that are now falling apart.

At least 2,000 homeowners were affected, and in many cases the repair bills have come close to equaling the value of their houses. Some families were covered by new-home warranties, but others have been bankrupted by the cost.

Litigation is underway, but it may drag out for years. In the meantime, Ms. Brosseau has been fighting to get the federal government to join the province in providing compensation for homeowners.

The departing Conservative government said no, but the Liberals promised during the election campaign to work with affected homeowners, a promise that seemed largely to be the result of work by Ms. Brosseau and another New Democrat from Quebec, Robert Aubin (he, too, was re-elected). Ms. Brosseau said she planned to hold Mr. Trudeau to his party's vow.

Jason Luckerhoff, a professor at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières who is studying the matter, estimates that Ms. Brosseau raised the concrete issue 70 times in Parliament — no small accomplishment for a junior member of an opposition party who admits to “shaking like a leaf” the first time she rose to speak in the House of Commons.

“When she was elected, at first, people were very, very skeptical,” Dr. Luckerhoff said. “There was a lot of joking around. But it was astonishing how quickly she became respected.”

Though Ms. Brosseau now has a home in her district, her son Logan, 14, lives in their house in the Ottawa suburb of Gatineau, Quebec. Her parents, who also live there, help out as caregivers when she is on the road or tied up in Parliament, assistance that Ms. Brosseau said had been vital to her new life.

She said she was thrilled that her work allowed her to provide Logan with more financial stability and the type of middle-class life she had growing up.

Ms. Brosseau, like many New Democrats, is no supporter of Mr. Trudeau, but she does share his idealism about the power of politics and the public good.

“One of the reasons I signed up to be a paper candidate in 2011 is that I’m an N.D.P.’er and I wanted to make the world a better place for single-parent families,” she said. “I got bit by the political bug; it’s in me, and it will always be in me.”