

# Mini firm, Mega practice

Patricia Houlihan is at the forefront of a new trend: high-octane independent practitioners who flee big firms to practise what they want, when they want, for clients of their own choosing. Now in mid-career, Houlihan has carved out a name for herself as one of Canada's best-known environmental lawyers, an area Kyoto is pushing to centre stage. She even speaks Japanese. **By Derek Lundy**

**I**nterviewing Vancouver lawyer Patricia Houlihan one sunny, blossomy day in mid-March unexpectedly brought the words of Henry David Thoreau to mind. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," the American writer and philosopher wrote in *Walden* in 1854. The only solution, he asserted, was to heed the beat of that "different drummer." Thoreau was an early advocate of self-realization: to head off life's desperation, each man must find and pursue his own way. One hundred and fifty years later, we can add: and each woman, too.

It was clear early on in our conversation that Houlihan had felt the desperation of doing work that didn't fit with who she was. (This may be one of the most common sensations lawyers have.) But she refused to submit to it. She heeded the different drummer; she took chances with her life and pursued her own way.

"I like to enjoy my life," she told me. "If I wanted to make four hundred thousand a year, I'd go to a big firm and work like a dog. But I make really good money and I work for whomever I want." Our conversation takes place in a bare office in a nondescript downtown building. It has a sixth-floor view of other buildings and some sky. She looks out and laughs — she has an abrupt, loud, infectious laugh. "That's the great thing about working for myself: it's sunny; I should be riding my bike right now. What am I doing in here?"

The office is absolutely featureless; it contains a modest, anonymous desk, credenza and filing cabinet. There is nothing on the walls and nothing on any surface until we dump our briefcases down. Houlihan and I are the only signs of life. The overwhelming temporariness of the place, and the sensory deprivation it produces, seem inconsistent with the busy, accomplished lawyer in front of me. But, in fact, it is a marker of her inner-directed success.

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