

Trudeau photos spark dialogue on race issues

By Brock Weir

Aurora's Liberal candidates are standing behind leader Justin Trudeau following the release of three images last week showing him in blackface and brownface, the earliest being when he was a high school student to the latest while teaching at a Vancouver school more than a decade ago.

The images, which emerged last Wednesday night, forced the Federal campaign to shift gears, while Trudeau apologised for donning the makeup, stating the images do not reflect who he is now.

While the images shifted the nationwide conversation, Aurora's Liberal candidates remained focused on the local issues.

‘I was very disappointed to see [the images, but] he acknowledges it was wrong then and it is wrong now,’ said Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill Liberal candidate Leah Taylor Roy. ‘I think we need to look at what his record has been over the last four years to see who he really is now, and I think that record speaks very clearly to the fact he is a Prime Minister who is inclusive, who has done things to help many marginalized groups, and that is just very positive in terms of race relations.

‘It is about looking at who the candidates are now. Let's look at Justin Trudeau vs. Andrew Scheer and what they stand, and what they have come out in support of today. As Andrew Scheer said himself, we can forgive people if they apologize and I think Justin Trudeau handled it very well. He came out, he said it was wrong, he took full responsibility and he immediately apologized to all the people of Canada, and I think most people accepted that.’

Newmarket-Aurora Liberal candidate Tony Van Bynen said he held a similar view.

‘I have to say I am disappointed and I heard the Prime Minister apologize in a very genuine and sincere way,’ he said. ‘I think he recognized that what happened has been hurtful to certain communities, but I think it is up to the Prime Minister to make apologies to the people who have been hurt by his actions. I believe he was forthright [in trying] to build on what he has learned.’

On the opposite side of the floor, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill Conservative candidate Leona Alleslev said both she and the residents she had spoken with were ‘very concerned’ by the images and what they represent.

‘Justin Trudeau's actions not only undermine his personal credibility, but also his authority as Prime Minister and Canada's reputation worldwide,’ she said. ‘80 per cent of Canada's GDP is derived from trade. A

nation's trade is built on the quality of its relationships with foreign leaders. Canada needs a Prime Minister who acts with the upmost integrity and is respected on the world stage to ensure we have a strong trading relationship and, in turn, a robust and growing economy.?

Newmarket-Aurora Conservative candidate Lois Brown also focused on the impact the images might have on the world stage.

?I do not believe that Mr. Trudeau is a racist?that is a very strong term; however, it does reflect his lack of good judgement and, unfortunately, diminishes Canada's reputation globally,? she said.

While Newmarket-Aurora NDP candidate Yvonne Kelly said she was ?disappointed? to see Mr. Trudeau in the pictures and was ?taken aback? that he would make those choices, she said that marginalized individuals who ?are accustomed to facing mockery, stereotypes and discrimination on a daily basis? were less surprised.

?An apology in my opinion, is only a first step but it can open up a more nuanced and deep conversation about race and racism in Canada,? said Ms. Kelly. ?There are more concrete actions that need to be taken by Justin Trudeau, his party, and all of us quite frankly, in order to demonstrate that this event has increased awareness of how racism of all forms remains embedded in our society and institutions. Real action and movement to address the living conditions of and lack of access to clean water for our Indigenous communities for example would go a long way to redressing the long-term consequences of anti-Indigenous racism in Canada.

?I most appreciated and resonated with the commentary from those who highlighted that we should not stay focused on the individual and whether or not Mr. Trudeau is indeed racist or not. If we do, we fail to see the bigger picture and learn from it. What we can learn from this experience is the degree to which race and racism is still not openly discussed and understood in our country. The negative impacts on our Indigenous and racialized communities is real and our failure to admit that and challenge policies and practices that perpetuate systemic racism, is where the focus of this discussion needs to go. The issue is much bigger and deeper than Mr. Trudeau alone.?