

BROCK'S BANTER: The Voice

By Brock Weir

Last Thursday, I felt like I was about to return to the scene of the crime.

I was headed north to Newmarket to Trinity United Church for what promised to be a lively evening.

It is not as though I had never been there before. I attended a wedding there to celebrate a union that had about as much sticking power as a well-worn Post-It note.

More recently, I was there for a lovely concert staged to commemorate the first anniversary of the fire that destroyed Aurora United Church.

Its aisles and pews are well-worn territory but, until last week, I had not been back in that church hall in nearly 25 years. Back then, I just about closed the place dressed in yellow and black war paint, offset by a fetching blue and brown hat reminiscent of what Bob Denver used to wear on Gilligan's Island.

I was a bumble bee and our troop of Beavers were tasked with staging some sort of musical on the theme. Needless to say, it was a traumatic experience. It was my first brush with stage fright and, so relieved when it was over, as the audience mercifully started to applaud after our big number, I clapped along with them. On stage. In what was supposed to be a tableau.

Ah well, I took comfort in the fact that this time we weren't going to be the stars (and I use the term very loosely) of the show.

Instead, that honour went to the five candidates (and counting) that are vying to be the next Member of Parliament for Newmarket-Aurora.

First, in alphabetical order, was perennial candidate Dorian Baxter, the most recent entry in the field, once again representing Sinclair Stevens' Progressive Canadian Party, Conservative candidate Lois Brown, NDP candidate Yvonne Kelly, Green Party candidate Vanessa Long, and Liberal candidate Kyle Peterson.

Hosted in partnership between Newmarket's Holy Cross Lutheran Church and the ecumenical group KAIROS, the meeting gave each candidate eight minutes to make their pitch on what they see as the top social issues facing Canadians today and how their respective parties would address these concerns.

By design, it wasn't designed to be a knock 'em down, drag 'em out brawl as some all-candidates sessions inevitably become, but a respectful way for the candidates to engage with their potential constituents en-masse before engaging in one-on-one meetings afterwards.

In the days leading up to the event, I was most curious to see if all Newmarket-Aurora candidates would actually show up for this one, given the recent decision by both of our Conservative candidates to skip out on the Vote Smart debate, a two-evening session designed to engage voters across the spectrum and, perhaps, more specifically, younger voters, in this election.

While Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill candidate Costas Menegakis offered The Auroran last week the vague explanation that the event just not fitting into his campaign plan, Newmarket-Aurora's Lois Brown, despite multiple requests, still has not weighed in on her campaign's rationale not to participate.

But, as luck would have it, Ms. Brown was in attendance last Thursday at the Newmarket event, as were nearly the full slate of candidates (Libertarian candidate Jason Jenkins was a no-show).

Just why this particular all-candidates meeting was different or, perhaps, a better fit into the campaign plan of these candidates remains unclear but, as of this writing ? and with a few hours to go before the candidates from Aurora's south riding are due to take the stage at the Aurora Cultural Centre ? there do not seem to be any last minute entries back onto the programme.

And that is a shame.

But, it is also a curiosity.

In the years I have covered Ms. Brown in her capacity as Member of Parliament, and in the nearly two years I have become familiar Mr. Menegakis since he was confirmed as candidate for Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill, I have never known them to turn down an opportunity to meet with and engage their constituents and/or voters.

So, the question must be why now in the midst of an election campaign?

For such seasoned pros, individuals who are able to get up in the House of Commons before over 300 of their colleagues and a viewing audience of countless individuals, the capacity of Brevik Hall should be a walk in the park.

They certainly couldn't have the stage fright I experienced on that very stage where the KAIROS debate unfolded last week.

With over four more weeks left to go before this unusually long election comes in for a landing, if one had to choose a hallmark of the campaign so far, it would have to be the debates. Although we have only had one nationally televised debate where all four

national leaders were able to spar with each other (and one more scheduled this Thursday), getting them together in various venues for debates on various themes ? including one specifically for issues pertaining to women ? has been like herding cats with just about every party leader ? Harper, Mulcair and Trudeau ? throwing up various roadblocks along the way.

There have been political tantrums, mud-slinging back and forth, debates over the merits of debates, heated discussions on striking the proper balance between each of Canada's official languages, and the choice of hosts.

Ordinarily, in the heat of an election campaign, most candidates ? and particularly leaders ? would take the opportunity to engage with as many voters as possible, in as many different venues as possible, and on as many different themes as possible. This, however, doesn't seem to be the case anymore and Canadians are not the better for it.

It was encouraging to see Aurora student Kelsea Walsh come up with a new way to engage voters and it is heartening to see most candidates take up her invitation to participate. As the clock runs down to the first meeting this week, and to the second meeting slated for this Thursday night, one can only hope the holdouts have a change of heart and those in attendance can truly see our democracy in action.

Who can predict the format of debates the next time the Governor General brings us together to play another round of Kick the Federal Can? Maybe there's value in a blind audition where party names and party leaders are temporarily suspended and voters in attendance can make a choice on their candidate based on ideas and platform alone.