

Housing, environment top priorities for NDP's Yvonne Kelly



By Brock Weir

As Yvonne Kelly continues her community work within York Region, she is seeing situations where it is getting harder and harder for middle-income Canadians to make ends meet.

They are struggling, she says, and worried about the essentials, including housing.

This is why Ms. Kelly, who represented the Newmarket-Aurora Federal NDP in the 2015 General Election, has decided to carry the orange banner once again in the community.

"A lot of the folks I am working with, even the ones who are doing quite well, are not going to be able to buy homes in the Region or somewhere else," says Ms. Kelly. "That is particularly concerning. In the work that I do, I am constantly hearing from people about how they want things to be different and better, and that has fuelled my conviction that it is important to me to put myself out there and do what I know I can do."

Since making the decision to throw her hat back into the political arena, Ms. Kelly has been knocking on doors. As she moves through the community listening to residents, the primary issues she hears time and time again are housing and the environment. Not a lot has changed on either file over the last four years, she says, and it is time to do something about it.

"Housing has not improved in terms of housing stock availability or rental and the cost of rental is what people might expect to pay on a mortgage for a home," says Ms. Kelly, a resident of Tottenham. "Those things don't get better with time unless there are investments made. I work with families and students in our school system. We see how people struggle and are not able to stay where they are, so there is a lot of mobility amongst families who aren't able to maintain rent, and that is a lot of hardship for

those students. I feel that if we don't take this issue absolutely seriously and start investing the way we were prior to the nineties in building affordable housing stock, then we aren't ever going to be able to address the problem.?

There has been increasing talk about addressing homelessness, something Ms. Kelly finds encouraging and productive, but this has not led to concrete investments.

Compounding the issue, she says, is the ?rampant increase? of precarious employment over the last few years; that is, people who are working more jobs, more hours, but are ?not making any headway in terms of the actual income they are bringing in.?

Recent studies, she says, have indicated that the GTA has the fastest increase of rates of precarious employment, which has a direct impact on quality of life. As such, income inequality is on the rise.

?We don't want to just create more services to meet the needs of people who happen to fall into those categories, we want to attack the root causes of those problems,? she says. ?For housing, it is something that people can afford, can afford to have a job that can have a living wage, or at least one job with a decent wage, then there would be a fighting chance to make ends meet and I think right now a lot of people feel like they are being hit on all fronts, and that's just not okay. That is not a vision for the future I want.?

The vision for the future she and the NDP want includes putting more money into affordable housing with the expressed goal of creating more stock. It's essential, she says, because if you don't do it now the country is not going to be able to meet the people's needs. It is a vision that includes expanded pharmacare and overall improvements to the health care system.

?We stand behind our legacy of universal health care, but we do know, for example, for seniors and lower income families, the cost of medication is precluding them from being able to take what they need to stay healthy,? she says. ?There are more and more seniors falling below the poverty line and medication is a huge issue for them.?

Their vision for child care, she says, is ?bold and progressive? and will help address ?the main income gap between genders. It's not about giving families a tax credit; it's about ?creating spaces? through an investment in infrastructure.

?The [conversation over the last four years] has changed in a number of ways,? she says. ?I think there has been a lot of frustration with the current government when it comes to things like promises that were made around the environment, around our electoral system that is more fair and inclusive and progressive, because that was a keystone promise of the Liberals in the 2015 election, that we would never have another election that was first

past the post, and that obviously isn't happening. There is some disillusionment with those kinds of big ideas that people believed in and I think were good ideas that didn't come to fruition. As a result, if you don't tackle some of these bigger structural and institutional issues, people on the ground end up feeling the pinch every step of the way.

?We continue to have a government and a society that supports large corporations over small people, or ordinary average Canadians. That can only continue for so long before people in the middle and lower- and working-class groups continue to lose ground. We have seen, for example, a huge spike in the numbers of seniors and families that are going to food banks, which is really alarming because food banks, as much as they are a solution, they were brought in as a temporary mainstay during the 80s in the recession. They are still here but they are actually being accessed more and more. When families are going to food banks, not just individuals who happen to be unable to find a job, but whole families, when shelters are having to turn away families because they are underhoused, been evicted, or haven't been able to maintain the cost of housing, that is really concerning. We see people really losing ground on those things.?