

'We don't have time for a leader in training,' says Elliott



By Brock Weir

Ontarians are going to the polls on June 7, and, if the Progressive Conservatives form government, they 'don't have time for a leader in training.'

So says Christine Elliott, one of the two leadership frontrunners hoping to take the helm of the Progressive Conservative (PC) party this week after a heated ' and unusually brief ' leadership campaign.

Ms. Elliott, a former MPP and, most recently, Ontario's Patients Ombudsman, was in Aurora on Saturday morning to meet with local party faithful to deliver her message of proven experience to take on Liberal leader Kathleen Wynne at the polls.

'We need to elect a Progressive Conservative majority government on June 7,' Ms. Elliott told the packed crowd at Aw, Shucks. 'It is not just because we, as party members, want to win; it's because Ontario needs us to win. We simply cannot afford another four more years of the Wynne Liberals. It is absolutely unaffordable in Ontario right now and we have to win on June 7.

'Just look at what has happened in the 15 years since they came together in 2003: hydro rates are going through the roof, our economy, which was once the envy of Canada, is now faltering, we have business owners who feel they are actually under attack by this government, that people are feeling the Wynne Liberals want them to either fold up their businesses or retire. We can't have that because what is happening is our students are graduating from our colleges and universities with huge student debt and no jobs to go to.'

This is not Ms. Elliott's first time running for the PC party's top job. She ran for the leadership in 2009, coming in third behind Tim Hudak, and Frank Klees, and ran for leadership once again in 2015, coming in just behind Patrick Brown with 38 per cent of the vote.

Party members began voting for their preferred leadership candidate on Friday and voting continues through March 8 before the votes are counted and the winner is announced in Markham on Saturday.

'This is a really unusual time, an unusual leadership election because we have a general election in fewer than 100 days,' said Ms. Elliott. 'There is a lot of work we have to do to hold the party together, there is a lot of work that has to be done there, but it is not as bad as some people would say. We have been hearing a lot of negative things in the last couple of weeks, but I do believe we have a firm foundation. We are ready to go and we're ready to win.'

Ms. Elliott used Saturday morning's rally as an opportunity to tout the Progressive Conservative's party platform, a document drafted with input from the grassroots that she said was 'great ' with one exception.'

That one exception, she said, was the proposal for a carbon tax contained within the party's People's Guarantee. Ms. Elliott said she has heard from many people that a carbon tax would simply be unaffordable and put undue burdens on local families.

But, some of the key tenets of the plan she supports are income tax cuts ' 22.5 per cent for middle income earners ' along with increased funding for mental health and addiction. This includes funding for autism, a dementia strategy, addressing the 'opioid crisis' and helping people with mental health challenges access services for therapy.

'I have spoken with several families that have daughters with significant eating disorders and they are being told they have to wait a

year for service," she said. "If that is the case, we could lose those young people and that is simply not acceptable to me. We also have a problem with lack of long term care beds. I heard a lot about that in my job as Patient Ombudsman.

"We have people in our hospitals: 25 per cent of patients in any given hospital in Ontario at any time that are frail, elderly seniors that can't go home, but they can't leave the hospital because there is nowhere else for them to go. We would build 15,000 long term care spaces within the first five years and another 15,000 in the five years thereafter.

"If we can deal with that issue, we can also deal with overcrowding in hospitals. Many hospitals are routinely operating at over 100 per cent capacity. We hear about 'hallway medicine' and that is because there are no beds for them to move to. If we deal with the long-term care problem we can deal with a lot of hallway medicine issues."

Before entering politics, Ms. Elliott said she has worked in a number of sectors, including several years as a bank auditor. With that in mind, she said she welcomes the opportunity when Premier to go through each program introduced by the Liberal party line by line and do a "value for money audit" through 15 years of Liberal waste and mismanagement."

"I truly believe the taxpayers of Ontario would expect that if a program isn't providing any value we shouldn't continue with it," she said. "We should then put the money into the programs that we have in our platform that was developed with our grassroots members who have talked to us about what we really need to have. I really would welcome that opportunity to do that line by line analysis. I know one of the other candidates has suggested just cut four cents, six cents, it might even be 10 cents right now, off the dollar, but I really don't think we can do that because then you might be cutting out programs that do have value. I think you need to take the time to go through the program line by line and decide on each and every program."

But, before that can take place, and their platform planks can be implemented, they will, of course, have to secure power. They might not be able to implement everything right away ("Because when we win we're going to have to see what the economic situation is. As bad as we think it is right now, I imagine we're going to find out it is a lot worse than that."), but she says she is more than up for the task.

"We need to make sure that we have somebody who is going to be able to go up and stand up to Kathleen Wynne," said Ms. Elliott. "Whether you like her or not, you have to admit she is a survivor. She's a good communicator, she's very intelligent, and we know the Liberals are going to throw whatever they can out there to make sure they win this election. We need somebody who is going to stand up to her and take her on, and I can tell you I have done that many times at Queen's Park in the past and I look forward to doing it in the future."