

Candidates dig deeper on Canadian security issues



By Brock Weir

Candidates vying for your vote in Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill did more to scratch the surface on Canada's security issues, taking the stage at the Aurora Cultural Centre in the first of two Vote Smart debates, hosted by Aurora university student Kelsea Walsh.

In Ms. Walsh's debate, which followed a slightly different format than your typical all-candidates debates, each person on the ballot was given a hypothetical situation and was tasked with addressing how they would address each situation as a Member of Parliament and if their party formed government.

‘One night in the riding, people start hearing gunshots,’ posed Ms. Walsh to Liberal candidate Leona Alleslev and NDP candidate Brenda Power (Conservative MP Costas Menegakis declined the invitation to participate). ‘Once investigated by police, it becomes clear that a wide-scale terrorist attack has begun in the riding. Fortunately, few people are harmed, but the incident incites fear into constituents and leads to demand for policy reform to address the situation. Would you propose any changes on the national scale in light of the terrorist attack? If so, what would they be?’

In response, both candidates suggested measures are currently in place that would make such a hypothetical situation unlikely, but proposed different paths to tackling the matter.

To prevent that scenario from playing out, Ms. Power said Canada's top priority should be to ‘stop making enemies’ and bring soldiers home. It is important, she said, to ‘shut out’ defence lobbyists and stop selling arms around the world. An NDP government will ‘aim to get respect’ for the Canadian government on the world stage, and ensure a place at the table in working with the UN to find peaceful resolutions to various international crises.

‘If we build our reputation and start getting the respect that we used to have, we could perhaps retain a seat on the security Council where we would have a voice,’ said Ms. Power. ‘I believe the security threats to this country are threats that come from within. By that, I am talking about terrorism, poverty, homelessness, [and] joblessness. I am talking about high student debt load, and I am talking about students who can't find jobs and don't have a future.’

‘These are the things that are threatening the security of our country. If we build a strong country with a strong economy, if we work on climate change, if we build a better country, these are ways we protect our country and take away the insecurity we are now experiencing.’

Ms. Power also said an NDP government would throw out the controversial Bill C51 in its entirety.

From the perspective of Ms. Alleslev, this election has been framed as a conversation about fear, or about hope, addressing criticisms levelled at the Liberal party for supporting the bill.

With the world changing, it is important to ensure Canada stays ahead of the advancements that would jeopardize our peace and security, she said. The bill itself had its good elements, she said, including information sharing with organizations within Canada and around the globe, but sweeping powers such as preventative arrests, what we would call spying, need to be immediately amended.

We have some of the best public safety organizations, I would argue, in the world, said Ms. Alleslev. We are really very safe here. It doesn't mean a terrorist attack won't happen, but we do not need to be fearful. Terrorists attacks are often from people who are disadvantaged, who haven't got jobs, who have lost hope, and who have become radicalized because they feel that is their only option and in many cases there are also mental health issues. The Liberal Party is going to work to create infrastructure and jobs that would hopefully give our youth a much more optimistic outlook and we are also going to make significant investments in mental health, so that I think would address hopefully a terrorist attack.