

Federal candidates hit the road for long-haul election campaign



Laureen Harper, wife of Conservative leader Stephen Harper, meets a young supporter during a whistle-stop visit of Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill on Wednesday afternoon, during the first week of an 11-week Federal election campaign. Auroran photo by Brock Weir

By Brock Weir

They're at the post and our local Federal candidates have hit the pavement for the longest Canadian election campaign in nearly 150 years.

After meeting with Prime Minister Stephen Harper at Rideau Hall on Sunday morning, Governor General David Johnston dissolved Parliament, triggering an 11-week Federal campaign. Speculation over the potential early election call kicked into high gear in the middle of the week, and candidates across parties were ready to answer the call.

Opinion polls currently have the NDP, Conservatives and Liberals in a very tight race, but with all possibilities open, one thing is certain on the local landscape: the October 19 election will bring significant changes to Aurora.

This time around, Aurora will be divided into two Federal electoral ridings, with residents on the north side of Wellington Street voting in the riding of Newmarket-Aurora and residents on the south side of Wellington will cast their ballots in the newly-created riding of Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill.

Vying for votes in Newmarket-Aurora are incumbent Conservative Lois Brown, Yvonne Kelly for the NDP, Vanessa Long for the Green Party, and Kyle Peterson for the Liberal Party. While the NDP and Greens had not yet confirmed their respective candidates in Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill at press time, the Liberal banner is being carried by Leona Alleslev while the Conservatives are represented by Costas Menegakis, who currently serves as MP for the riding of Richmond Hill.

But, while all candidates say they are ready to hit the ground running, some have voiced concerns about the impacts of an early election call.

"I believe Harper's decision to have a 78 day election, more than double the typical 37 day period, shows a flagrant disregard for the sacred trust Canadians have placed in him to treat taxpayers' money with great respect," says Ms. Alleslev. "Estimates say that this longer election period will cost taxpayers over \$125 million more than the standard 37 day period. At a time when our economy is in

a recession, and the Parliamentary Budget Officer confirmed that we are [on] track to run a \$1 billion deficit this year, it is both unnecessary and unconscionable that he would choose to spend money that our Federal government just doesn't have in this way.?

Costs of a longer-election period are shared across the board by candidates looking to unseat their Conservative rivals, including Ms. Kelly, who calls 11-week campaign unnecessary.

?[Some say] this is a better situation for Mr. Harper's Conservatives to be in because they obviously have a lot more money to spend than anyone else,? she says. ?If I felt like it was a decision made for everyone's best interests, I would probably say this is a good idea, but I don't think it really was made for everyone's best interests. It does cost the taxpayer an incredible amount of money. I am not in agreement with them calling it early but, having said that, it will engage people from an earlier point of time. You roll with the punches.?

Added Mr. Peterson: ?Mr. Harper thinks it will be an advantage to his party. Every decision he makes seems to be made through that prism.

Unfortunately, it is going to cost Canadian taxpayers \$100 million to have an early election, which is the unfortunate part of it. I also think Mr. Harper is somewhat concerned about third-party advertising and we've started to see some of those ads run in the later part of July. By calling an early election those aren't allowed to run anymore. Third parties are limited to what they can spend, so I think that was the biggest driving force.?

Ms. Long, on the other hand, has a slightly different point of view. While she says she shares the belief the Conservatives ?having the biggest chest of money? was a factor, there are some plusses.

?They have the largest donor base and by effectively doubling what is allowed to be used during the election gives them an advantage and takes us much closer to the U.S. style politics, which they have been modelling all along,? she says. ?Because of the fixed date election, people have been campaigning for months anyway, so it actually kind of makes sense because at least we're now under election campaign financing rules and before it was all loopy-goopy.?

Local Conservative candidates, however, say the early election call levels the playing field considerably for all candidates.

?It is the prerogative of the Prime Minister to call the election,? says Ms. Brown. ?We have known since June 2011 there was going to be an election on October 19, 2015. So, all of us who were planning to run again, the parties have had equal time to prepare and get messages out to voters. This early call focuses people a little bit more and gives Canadians the opportunity to take a look at the clear choice they have in front of them.?

Mr. Menegakis agrees: ?Calling the election gives us the opportunity, of course, to level the playing field and that way all parties are working under the same rules and regulations. I think it is important with the extra time we have left to get the message out of what the party stands for and what we, as candidates, have to offer to our constituencies.

?[Opposition parties] have the exact same opportunities to spend money, to put ads out, and the field is level for everyone. Everyone has the exact same opportunities to do everything. It doesn't give one party an advantage over another. If our party happens to be better organized, better funded and more ready, that speaks to their parties and some of the inadequacies in their administrations. By pointing out they feel they are at a disadvantage by playing on a level playing field speaks volumes.?