

Hydro, debt light up Newmarket-Aurora debate



By Brock Weir

Prosperity is the name of the game for local business, and it was once again the theme for the second business-focused debates taken on by candidates in the riding of Newmarket-Aurora.

Liberal candidate Chris Ballard, Progressive Conservative candidate Christine Elliott and NDP candidate Melissa Williams faced off for another round of debates on Thursday morning as the Newmarket Chamber of Commerce hosted their forum at Cardinal Golf Club, addressing a mix of questions posted by the Ontario Chamber as well as audience members.

Addressing the audience, Ms. Williams said like many people in attendance that morning, she is a business owner who appreciates the challenges faced by the business community, including rising hydro bills, employees without dental or prescription benefits, and the number of employees who have to work two jobs just to make ends meet.

"This is something that has become part of life. Like many of you, I want a thriving economy so that our businesses can grow and be competitive," she says. "Ontario deserves better. Life keeps hitting harder, so we need to be able to make those decisions.

Conservatives want to cut, they want to privatize. We don't have a plan from them yet, so we don't know exactly what will be cut. Will it be nurses? Will it be teacher's jobs? Nobody knows.

"We want to make lives better for everyday Ontarians. The Ontario NDP plan will address the underfunding of services, the group revenue and program that has faced delivery problems which underline the fiscal challenges that have come about after two decades of the Liberals and Conservatives. This is more than just winning an election, it is about the kind of province we want our economy, our children, our grandchildren, the next generation of seniors to be able to live a successful and secure life."

Mr. Ballard, on the other hand, played up his hometown credentials in a nod at Ms. Elliott, who does not live in the riding.

"I know a lot of you in this room, so you know I am a local fellow, born and raised in this area," he said. "My wife Audrey and I have raised three children in this area, I ran a small business for 25 years in this area and I am not going to forget about this area. As I did for the first four years, I did not forget about Newmarket-Aurora when I was at Queen's Park.

"I am a local guy, I don't need Google Maps to find my way around this Town. I am also an optimist and I'm an optimist for a number of reasons. I am an optimist when I look at how well Ontario's economy is doing - two per cent growth year over year - better than Canada, better than G7 - 822,000 new jobs created, good paying jobs, since the recession in 2008. There are a lot of really good things happening in Ontario. I am still waiting to get a fully costed platform from Doug Ford. I know that the Chamber's platform calls for all parties to put forward platforms that are fully costed. I don't think we're going to see that from the Tories because there is just not enough time. Liberals stand for care and opportunity. Ours is a plan for care and opportunity. It was produced with wide public consultation. Our budget will help people across the province."

For Ms. Elliott, this election, and the Progressive Conservatives, are about "building strong, healthy communities in Ontario where business plays a central role."

"That is important in many ways, but it brings almost everything into the equation," she said. "We talk about education, post-secondary education, and making sure businesses are involved with post-secondary education so they understand what the jobs of the future are, to make sure people can be trained for those jobs. We're talking about health care. We want to make sure we have health care there for the needs of the community now and for 10 to 15 years in the future. We know we're not getting the best value

out of our health care dollar. That's what we're talking about in the PC party: finding ways that we can make our health care system more efficient, more operational, so we can then advance it into providing other care we need.?

Addressing the need to get rid of red tape and reduce regulation, lower hydro rates, and increase productivity, she took aim at the proposed deficits outlined in the Liberal government's latest budgets through 2025.

?That is very frightening,? she continued. We can't do that. So, when we talk about our own family businesses, our family finances, we have to have priorities. We prioritize in the Progressive Conservative party. We will be presenting a fully costed plan that is going to be accurate and not \$4 billion more than has actually been stated like the Liberals' budget is. We will have one that is fully accurate?for presentation before the election.?

BALANCING THE BUDGET

Balancing the budget was a key issue addressed by each of the three candidates and whether or not the Liberals have a plan to return to a balanced budget was a question posed directly to Mr. Ballard.

There is a plan, he argued, and that plan is to return to balance by that 2025 deadline.

While debt has grown, he said, the economy has grown too.

?We have had the fastest-growing economy,? said Mr. Ballard. ?We outpaced Canada in terms of the growth of our economy, we outpaced the G7 in terms of the growth of our economy and we're doing that, in part, because we are making the necessary investments. We're investing in business, we're investing in infrastructure, business needs to get the job done, and we're going to continue to do that.

?With a growing economy, a quickly growing economy, comes the ability to service the debt. Under Mike Harris, 15.5 cents of every revenue dollar went to pay interest to service the debt. Under Kathleen Wynne, that's down to eight cents of every dollar. We're going to continue to work effectively to make sure that we have the thriving economies, the thriving communities that we need so your businesses do well, so that you can grow your businesses. We're not backing off on putting investment into the places that business tells us we need to put our investments and people tell us we need to put our investments. Yes, we have a path forward. It is in our budget and it is laid out clearly.?

Ms. Elliott, on the other hand, said she wasn't seeing the ?boom? what Mr. Ballard described as a ?booming economy.?. If the economy is indeed booming, she questioned, why is there a need to run multi-billion dollar deficits through 2025?

?It should not be necessary; we should not be in a deficit situation in Ontario right now,? Ms. Elliott contended. ?I know the Federal government did put us in deficit during the last recession, but that was to build the economy. I don't see that happening here. I see that these are just investments to get votes in the next election and that is not good public policy and it is not how government should make decisions. Whatever number you're talking about [with] the dollar value of the debt we're paying, if you tripled the debt since you took control in 2015 and we're paying \$12 billion in increases each and every day just on interest on borrowed money, that has to stop.?

Ms. Williams expressed a similar viewpoint, but with a different solution. The NDP, she said, would undo ?years and years? of underfunding the debt.

?Conservatives have put through and the Liberals continue to ignore the dismal record that was put [out] by the Auditor General,? she said. ?What the NDP will be doing is listening to the auditors' recommendations and implementing those recommendations so we can continue to bring that down.?

HYDRO AND ELECTRICITY RATES

The rising cost of energy has been something long-cited as a hindrance by businesses and was a prime issue pressed to the candidates.

Moderators asked Ms. Elliott how she and the Progressive Conservatives would address high electricity rates and, in turn, boost competitiveness and jobs.

?This is a serious concern because we know in the last 15 years we lost 300,000 manufacturing jobs in Ontario, particularly in areas like southwestern Ontario, which has been particularly hard-hit,? she said. ?One of the biggest reasons for that is the high electricity rates and we need to take a look at what's going on there and understand what the concerns are.

?One of the things that we would get rid of is the Green Energy Act, which has caused a huge number of problems with the very high subsidies? I am not talking about some of the smaller FIT (Feed In Tariff) contracts, but the large ones have caused big problems. The cancellation of the gas plant for \$1 billion also adding to that. Both individuals and businesses are seeing their hydro rates escalate dramatically and if you're in manufacturing, that is going to be one of your major costs. We need to sit down and take

a look at the entire system, figure out what has gone wrong.?

What has gone wrong, in the view of Ms. Williams, is the Liberal government's sale of Hydro One.

?They sold off a valuable public asset as soon as they came into power when they were last elected. Families across the Province have seen their hydro bills climb up while the Hydro One executives, of course, see lots of [bonuses],? said Ms. Williams. ?The Conservatives started the privatization scheme the last time they were in power and, of course, they cannot be trusted to protect the public interest. The NDP plan to return Hydro One into public hands to reduce our bills immediately by 30 per cent and mandatory time of day pricing and make permanent fixes to the system for a long-term solution.?

But Mr. Ballard argued returning Hydro One to a fully publicly-owned entity would solve nothing to address hydro woes.

?I would rather own 40 per cent of a well-run organization than 100 per cent of something that was failing,? he insisted. ?Mark my words, five years from now, we will most likely be making more money as a 40 per cent shareholder of a well-run company than 100 per cent shareholder of something that is not that good. Christine, you mentioned gas plants. Really? Are we still flogging that one? Go and look at the videos of Tim Hudak standing in front of the gas plants saying, ?Don't vote for the Liberals, vote for me, because I will tear down the gas plants and Andrea Horwath was there as well.' You guys need to put that gas plant stuff to bed, quite frankly. All three parties promised to do it. We are going to continue to work with businesses, especially manufacturing businesses to ensure they are as efficient as possible and hydro costs continue to be reduced.?