

Jobs, retirement take centre stage in first debate



By Brock Weir

Newmarket-Aurora's Provincial candidates got the blood pumping in the first public all-candidates meeting of the election on Friday night.

After recording a further debate earlier in the day, they arrived at Newmarket Theatre primed and ready to go. Ready to do battle in the political theatre were Liberal candidate Chris Ballard, Canadians' Choice candidate Dorian Baxter, NDP candidate Angus Duff, Libertarian candidate Jason Jenkins, Green Party candidate Andrew Roblin, and Progressive Conservative candidate Jane Twinney.

There, the candidates tackled issues ranging from hospital care to the local bee population. While the question of the bees seemed to have everyone stumped, except for Roblin, predominant issues coming to the fore were the economy and pensions.

Spurring the debate were two controversial proposals from the Liberals and PCs. The first, under Kathleen Wynne, is a pitch to put 1.9 per cent of people's paycheques into a new Ontario Pension Plan. The other, dubbed the Million Jobs Plan, has PC leader Tim Hudak proposing to cut over 100,000 public sector jobs, through attrition, in an effort to streamline frontline service.

The first question out of the gate addressed whether they would tackle eliminating Ontario's deficit and debt while protecting 'core services.' Twinney said the answer would be found in the PC plan.

'Part of this is by reducing the number of public service workers and this is part of the reason why there is a lot of concern out there,' said Twinney. 'We need to reduce the size of our government. We need to reduce it back to the levels they were only five years ago [and] this will certainly help our debt.'

For Ballard, however, that question is more complex than 'saying cut here or cut there.' Ontario, he said, was coming out of the 'worst recession' since 1929 and there are pressing issues at hand.

'We will not pay down the deficit or the debt until government has its revenues back in place and we have our economy rolling along,' said Ballard. 'We won't get it rolling along if we are cutting 100,000 jobs from our market.'

Roblin said solutions could be found to get money flowing into Ontario's coffers by increasing royalties in resource extraction, merging Ontario's two school boards to 'save \$1 - \$6 billion a year' to reinvest in education, and lowering payroll taxes on small businesses. Reducing the debt and deficit can't be achieved by reducing taxes, argued Duff. A better plan was increasing tax on corporate profits by one per cent, he said.

It was a simple question with a simple answer, contended Jenkins. The answer lies in cutting taxes 'dramatically' along with the size of government, smashing provincial monopolies on services such as energy, and boosting competition.

Nevertheless, while always interconnected with the economy, focus was continually steered back towards jobs and business.

According to Ballard, Ontario is still smarting from the 'mistakes of the Harris era' and 'firing 100,000 people' would push Ontario back into a recession and 'risk the gains' the Province has made.

'Attracting and retaining businesses in Ontario is a very important thing that we must do,' said Twinney, adding this will be fostered with a corporate tax reduction, addressing 'spiraling' hydro rates, and reducing red tape.

'Every business in Ontario should have an equal chance to thrive here and we need to keep them here in Ontario,' she added. 'We need to redirect our health funding from bureaucracies to the frontline. That is the key - getting rid of our LHINs (Local Health Integration Networks), ensuring we are getting rid of the bureaucrats who are not affecting us on a day-to-day basis and making sure that we have the doctors, the nurses, and the people who are taking care of us on the frontlines.'

No nurses, no doctors, and no police officers would be cut and this would all be done through attrition over a four year plan, she continued. As people retire, these vacant positions simply won't be filled. Money saved can be redirected back where it's needed.

'It is important to make sure we have the people that are needed in the positions that should be there.'

That argument did not hold water for Ballard, who questioned how Twinney, 'as a municipal Councillor' could 'defend' firing 100,000 people, considering the profound impact it will have on our community's economy, property taxes, and delivery of services to children, but Twinney contended it was all about people retiring and not being 'fired.'

RETIREMENT

But as many people approach retirement age, the question is, 'then what?'

All candidates provided different visions on just what this retirement might look like with questions being prompted by the Liberal Party's proposed Ontario Pension Plan.

Responding to the question of how their respective parties would ensure 'Ontarians are equipped with the resources they need to support themselves' without putting too much of a burden on business, Duff said retirement pensions are not something that can be 'developed overnight.'

'The NDP is completely committed to helping those in society who are in need,' he said. 'If those are retirees, those are the people we should be supporting in some form of assistance to those who need some assistance.'

Roblin, on the other hand, said the Greens would ensure no Ontarians fall below the poverty line and this would be done through a luxury tax 'from those who have more than an abundant income' which would then help seniors with their pension plans.

Taking aim at Kathleen Wynne, Baxter said the Ontario Pension Plan solution was not a 'win-win' for Ontario.

'Paying 1.9 per cent for each employee' is going to damage so many small businesses,' said Baxter, adding any shortcomings can be laid at the doorstep of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who should be lobbied for a stronger Canada Pension Plan. 'I think Ms. Wynne has missed the boat.'

Ballard contended the Ontario plan was indeed a 'win-win' situation for tens of thousands of 'middle class' Ontarians who don't have anything beyond the CPP.

'Anyone knows the CPP is woefully inadequate,' he said. 'It does not pay even the basics. The concern that we have is the vast number of middle class Ontarians who, because they are not working for companies with a good pension, or are struggling to make

ends meet with the rent or sending kids to school, they can't possibly pay. This is good for society, it is good for business, and it certainly is good for the people who have no other resource.

?The requirements for a made-in-Ontario pension plan are well-documented. The CPP is just not enough and despite repeated entreaties to Mr. Harper, he refused to come to the table to help middle-class Canadians with their retirement needs. The particulars of the plan, quite frankly, I haven't drilled down quite deep other than to say this is good for Ontario. It is a good thing for business. I am a small business person and I won't mind paying it if we get into this.?

Twinney, on the other hand, wasn't buying it.

?Only people who put money into it are going to see any of this funding,? she said. ?I don't know how long this is going to take, but the seniors today aren't going to see any of this funding. I don't believe the government is in a situation where they can take my money and invest it for me. I would prefer my own money in my RRSP and ensure that it is there for me when I get old.?

Voters will have a further chance to question their local candidates this Saturday afternoon as The Auroran hosts an all-candidates meeting at Aurora Town Hall. Doors open at 2.30 p.m., and the debate runs from 3 ? 5 p.m. Doors open at 2.30 p.m.