

Pensions in the spotlight as Provincial campaign continues



By Brock Weir

Liberal candidate Chris Ballard had some high profile help on the campaign trail last week in former Prime Minister Paul Martin.

Mr. Martin joined Ballard at the Aurora Shopping Centre to meet local merchants, large and small, to highlight businesses in Downtown Aurora.

Martin arrived in Aurora after meeting with Kathleen Wynne to discuss the Liberal Party's Ontario Retirement Pension Plan.

After a tour of area shops, Martin and Ballard proceeded up Yonge Street to take in the patriotic mural at the Yonge and Wellington intersection and meet supporters at an area salon.

A long-time supporter of Aboriginal issues, Mr. Martin walked from Yonge and Wellington to make an impromptu visit to the Aurora Cultural Centre to take in Indiginesse, curated by Newmarket artist Nathalie Bertin, bringing together the diverse voices of Aboriginal, Inuit and Metis women from across Canada.

But, before the tour wrapped with a visit close to his heart, it was down to the business at hand.

?I have been very impressed with the advice he has been giving us with regards to the Made in Ontario Pension Plan,? said Ballard of his visitor.

Speaking to The Auroran, Martin said pensions are a Federal-Provincial program and something that has been ?left to fester? over the last two decades. In talks with Ontario's then-finance minister, Ernie Eves, Mr. Martin said he said something had to be done about it.

?The Minister said yes, and they responded that this was part of nation-building,? said Mr. Martin. ?It is beyond belief to me that when Kathleen Wynne and other provincial premiers said we want to deal with the Canada Pension Plan and enhance it, the Federal government said no. In terms of nation-building, the Federal Government simply turned its back on the country. It is just really unacceptable.

?What Kathleen Wynne has come up with is the Ontario Plan, which is really a superb plan prepared by some of the best minds in the country. As she has said, it is unfortunate that the Federal government would not go along with enhancing the Federal Pension Plan, but what she has done, which no other province has done, is recognize that people today are looking to a retirement on an insufficient amount of money and that it is not fair that somebody should work all their life and then not have a decent retirement. Kathleen Wynne has come up with a program that will make it work.?

Mr. Martin then set his sights on criticism levelled on the plan by PC leader Tim Hudak.

?Hudak has said this is a tax; it is not a tax,? said Martin. ?It is an investment in your future, just the same way OMRS and any other pension fund is an investment in your future. To say it is a tax is to say mutual funds are a tax. They are not. For him not to recognize that just shows a basic lack of understanding of what pensions are all about.

?The second thing is the amount of confidence it gives to the economy. This is going to strengthen the economy.?

PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE JANE TWINNEY

Progressive Conservative candidate Jane Twinney, however, thinks otherwise and says she agrees with Mr. Hudak. Citing an announcement from Magna International last month that further expansion in Ontario was not on the horizon, she cites this ?pension tax? as a contributing factor, along with rising hydro rates.



PC candidate Jane Twinney was joined by Frank Klees at the opening of her campaign office last week. Auroran photo by David Falconer

?I get CPP taken off, which is fine, it gets put away, but I have my own RRSP, which I am investing for my retirement and I don't need to have another amount taken off my personal paycheque, which will reduce my paycheque and my disposable income when I am already saving,? says Ms. Twinney. ?If something, God forbid, happens to me, the money I put away is no longer going to be going to my family as well. The Canadian Association of Independent Businesses stated that this payroll tax would cost 160,000 jobs in Ontario. This is something that is of grave concern to myself, and is of concern to the people who are struggling to make ends meet with the money they have at the end of the day in their paycheque.

?People perhaps are thinking, ?Oh, good, maybe there will be more money to help us get by,' but the seniors aren't going to benefit from this plan at all. Obviously the fund would have to be started, have to be managed, there will be more bureaucrats who have to take care of all this and it is just not the right direction to go.?

From her perspective, a better solution is the PC's plan proposing a 10 per cent reduction in income tax. That, she said, would help ?everybody right now? and not just ?a selected few.?

That will make sure there is more money at the end of the day in people's pockets, there will be more disposable income for them to spend, which will help the economy, make ends meet, and have a better life.?

NDP CANDIDATE ANGUS DUFF

The NDP, on the other hand, have been ?firmly committed? to providing services to pensioners and all Ontarians, but candidate Angus Duff says the Liberals can't be trusted with delivering.

?The Liberals can't manage the pensions they have,? said Mr. Duff. ?They are currently trying to make up the \$500 million shortfall in the OPG pension in order to be [able to] pay out rich pensions there, and now the Liberals say they can manage everyone else's pension.

?This is ludicrous and mean, playing on those who are struggling in our society. The NDP has a very simple approach instead, let's help those who are struggling rather than create another financial fiasco.?

GREEN PARTY CANDIDATE ANDREW ROBLIN

For the Green Party of Ontario, Ottawa should be the catalyst for pension reform with help from the other provinces. A new form of the Guaranteed Income Supplement would also be implemented in Ontario by the Green Party.

?This would greatly address the issues low-income seniors face,? says Green candidate Andrew Roblin. ?It would provide a top-up to those making below the low-income cut-off. This will provide for an improved quality of life for our seniors. Additionally, our policy on retrofitting homes to save energy would also help seniors who own their own homes for the things they enjoy the most. A side benefit of the retrofit program would also assist in the health and well-being of seniors who suffer when dealing with extreme temperature changes. Having energy-efficient homes makes it easier to maintain a more consistent temperature environment.

CANADIANS' CHOICE PARTY'S DORIAN BAXTER

Mr. Baxter says he believes Ontarians can do better than a new Ontario Retirement Pension Plan (ORPP) and has ?serious misgivings? about the plan. If the Federal Government ?lived up? to equalization payments to Ontario, it might be a more feasible solution, he argues.

?Presently, out of 7.5 million employable Ontarians, around 570,000 are unemployed,? he said. Approximately 45 per cent of 6.9 million Ontarians make less than \$25,000. Those who make less than \$25,000 are usually employed by low-paying jobs in service sectors and their employers are reluctant to pay the additional 1.9 per cent that it would cost these businesses given that they are already struggling with payments of up to \$1.5 billion each year.

?By implementing ORPP, we have to remove about \$11 billion from out of the pockets of the employees and employers and this will no longer be in the circulation and could therefore result in further stagnation of the Ontario economy. This does not even take into consideration the additional costs associated with the bureaucracy, administration, money and fund managing costs.?