

Politicians issue a challenge in wake of Quebec attack

By Brock Weir

They may have been somewhat at a loss for words, but representatives of all three levels of government shared the idea that diversity is Canada's strength Saturday's Aurora Community Vigil, remembering the six men killed in a terrorist attack at a Quebec City mosque last weekend.

Attending the event at the Aurora Cultural Centre little over an hour after celebrating the start of Black History Month at York Regional Police's Aurora headquarters, Mayor Geoff Dawe said coming to the vigil right after the celebration, the theme of which focused on celebrating diversity, was "almost like a bit of whiplash."

"Canada is a country I believe celebrates, grows and benefits from its diversity," said Mayor Geoff Dawe. "We are almost all immigrants, whether it is my family that goes back a couple of hundred years, or my wife's family who came in 1960, or Syrian refugees who just joined our great country. It is diversity that makes us unique, it is diversity that really celebrates our values of hope, of inclusivity and understanding.

"We certainly stand together. We are a community, and it is extremely important to include everyone, to talk to everyone, and bring them into the fold. Ignorance is the tool that will bring us down. We have to struggle so hard to work against that ignorance."

Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leona Alleslev told the standing-room-only crowd that the "senseless shooting [left her] disheartened" that such intolerance could occur in Canada.

Strength, she said, is our diversity.

"Our strength is our acceptance," she said. "Our strength is our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and these are Canadian values we hold dear. This intolerant act does not reflect our values and I am so proud Canadians from across the country have come together to stand against this violent act. Canadians have fought and sacrificed to uphold our values of peace, diversity and acceptance. We must continue to stand united in our values during this time of tragedy."

Representing Newmarket-Aurora MP Kyle Peterson, who had a previous commitment, were staffers Sarah Campbell-Morales and Samir Kassam, who read his message.

"There are those who fan the flames of fear, bigotry and hatred," they relayed. "We must stand up to them, stronger than we have. Canadians will not be intimidated. This was an attack not only on Muslims but our shared values of openness, transparency, and freedom. I will always stand with you, my Muslim brothers and sisters."

Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard also came to the vigil from the Black History Month celebration. The events in Quebec, he said, left "all of us shaken."

"I speak for the majority of those who call Aurora home when I say that we will not stand for hatred. Let this horrible act in Quebec bring us together, regardless of our faith, the colour of our skin, the place of our birth," he said. "If I have learned one thing in my life, it is that we all want the same thing regardless of our background and who we are. We all want a better life for ourselves, a better life for our children. We want our children to grow up to be happy and safe and helping to make our society, this Canada, Aurora an even better place. That is the Canadian dream.

"I challenge everyone in this room, although I know I am speaking to the converted, because you are here, to look about their neighbourhood, to find someone who is different than them, whether they be of a different colour skin, worship in a different way, and reach out. Let's form some real bonds of friendship that Aurora, historically, has been known for. I know it is in the Aurora spirit."