

Provincial candidates tackle positions on how to tackle debt

By Brock Weir

Ontario's debt has been a hot topic for months leading up to the official start of the 2018 Provincial Election, and Wednesday was no exception as the Aurora Chamber of Commerce hosted an all-candidates forum.

It was the first time that confirmed candidates in both of Aurora's ridings were able to challenge each other's positions face to face in a forum largely focused on business and prosperity.

Participating in the debate were Chris Ballard (Liberal, Newmarket Aurora), Christine Elliott (Progressive Conservative, Newmarket-Aurora), Serge Korovitsyn (Libertarian, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill), Michael Parsa (Progressive Conservative, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill), Melissa Williams (NDP, Newmarket-Aurora), Bob Yaciuk (Trillium Party, Newmarket-Aurora), and Naheed Yaqubian (Liberal, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill).

First to tackle the debt issue was Ms. Elliott, a file she said has been 'grossly mismanaged' by the Liberal government over the last 15 years.

'Since taking office in the last 15 years, the Liberals have tripled Ontario's debt and it is expected to reach \$400 billion should they be re-elected,' she said. 'The cost to service that debt is now the third largest expense in government after health care and education, and they just announced their deliberate intention to increase that debt with their recent budget. As a result of this government's plan to run six consecutive multi-million dollar deficits, Moodie's has recently downgraded Ontario's position from stable to negative. These are your dollars. Your money. Not for services, not for health care, not for education ' simply to pay the bankers and creditors.

'The Liberals often say they are the party that cares. I would say there is nothing caring about spending money we don't have, especially at election time, borrowed off the backs of future generations. I have three 27-year-old sons and like many of you I'm sure I can't bear the thought of leaving them so far down a financial hole that they are never going to be able to get out of it and they are never going to be able to have the same quality of life. Despite what the Liberals say, everybody in this room knows that nothing is free. Unlike the Liberals and the NDP, we don't spend money we don't have. As one of our five priorities, we have committed to restoring trust, responsibility and accountability in government.'

Ms. Elliott touted PC leader Doug Ford's plan to set up a commission to find out what the 'true state of finances in Ontario is' and 'stop the waste of taxpayers dollars' on things like cancelled gas plants and E-Health.

'We will make sure that fiscal prudence will come from setting priorities. We will set them based on the needs of all Ontarians.' Tackling this position on behalf of the Liberals was Chris Ballard who said there was some 'oversimplification' at the table in not recognising 'good debt and bad debt.'

'We borrow money to buy a house because we have to live somewhere. We borrow money, many of us, to buy a car because we have to get to work. It is similar with the types of investments we're making here in Ontario,' said Mr. Ballard. 'We have made a deliberate choice to invest in healthcare, child care, seniors care, and as a result, we still have a small deficit, less than one per cent of GDP. We did the hard work in years gone past to bring the province back to balance, and I can tell you having attended some pretty feisty Treasury Board meetings there was a lot of wrestling to get us back to that balance. We have chosen to invest in infrastructure, in health care, in education and other important services that help build a sustainable community.

'We're doing things like making prescription drugs free for children and youth and for seniors, and we have invested in free tuition and invested in child care because all of these things mean we get to live in sustainable communities which support sustainable businesses. We have also made the largest investment in public infrastructure in the Province's history, more than \$190 billion over 13 years. If you look at what is happening with our GO Train service, we are still on track to bring 15 minute all day electrified service to Newmarket-Aurora. We have invested in roads, bridges, highways, hospitals and schools and all along the way we have generated a booming economy: 820,000 jobs last count, I believe the last Stats Can report is over 1 million since the great recession of 2008, over 400,000 jobs under this Premier alone. That is 500 jobs every day that Premier Wynne has been in office. Our unemployment rate is the lowest it has been in over 20 years. Not my stats, Stats Can.'

Ms. Williams, on the other hand, likened the Liberal Government as a house ' one which now has a 'leaking roof.'

'After so many years of mismanagement we need to fix that,' she said. 'We have homelessness, which is big in Newmarket-Aurora. We have people that have cavities that need to be filled. We have seniors we need to make sure can access' and make sure they retire safely as well as with dignity. I, like you, do not want to leave my children or grandchildren with any debt. The NDP does have a costed plan that has been approved by Kevin Page, the former Parliamentary Budget Officer and when I look at Mr. Ford, he has

recently promised to cut \$24 billion in taxes. He also will be adding new spending that needs to come from somewhere.

?The NDP will address a decade-long trend of funding cuts and freezes to services and we will address this by addressing the sustainability in which we fund these services. We will close loopholes and corporate income tax giveaways and, of course, ask the wealthiest of Ontarians to contribute a little more and pay their fair share. We need to be able to improve the integrity of the tax system of Ontario. Our plan is one that focuses on undoing years of underfunding, while addressing the fiscal challenges we face as a province. We will make investments in Ontario that makes life better for everyone. We will protect middle class families from tax hikes and we'll only count on the revenues we know we can rely on.?

For the other two candidates, it was once again, from their perspective, more of the same.

?How about we do like every household does: if you don't have the money, don't spend it,? said Mr. Yaciuk. ?That's a good start. When I hear other parties say, ?yeah, we're going to balance the budget in 2020' it is kind of interesting because that is the equivalent of somebody coming to your house, a dinner party, and saying, ?John and I were thinking about not spending more money than we make in two years.' You'd laugh at that and say, ?What's wrong with you?' Stop spending what you don't have.

?Christine's boss, Doug Ford, said they are going to have a commission to find out what the true state of affairs is. The Auditor General did that. Are we not trusting the Auditor General right now? If not, let's can the Auditor General. No, we trust the Auditor General. Why are we duplicating work? This cycle has to stop, for Pete's sake.?