

Transport, security highlight new riding's all-candidates meeting



By Jake Courtepatte

Both boos and cheers rained down on the Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill Federal candidates on Thursday at a spirited all-candidates meeting held at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School.

The gymnasium held around 200 supporters wearing the colours of all different represented parties, while Liberal candidate Leona Alleslev, Kyle Bowles of the Animal Alliance party, Conservative candidate Costas Menegakis, and NDP candidate Brenda Power took to the stage.

An hour-long, moderated question period laid the candidates' platforms on the table to some differing audience responses.

Almost certainly the candidate to elicit the most emotion was the outspoken Menegakis, the incumbent for the Richmond Hill portion of the new riding.

During the discussion, he presented his political and corporate experience.

"I'm a businessman and an entrepreneur," said Menegakis. "I've spent a good portion of my life, almost 25 years, working within the community in not-for-profit organizations. I've been lucky enough to work in parliament for the last four years."

Power, on the other hand, took a different approach while speaking freely about her position as a representative "for the people."

"I've been unemployed, on social assistance, I was a single parent at seventeen," said Power. "I'm deeply passionate about what is right for our community. I've been infuriated, just despondent about what the Conservative party has done to this country."

Early on, the important topic appeared to be that of transportation, with each candidate acknowledging that they had utilized the YRT and Viva services before. Menegakis was quick to point out that the Conservative government had given \$50 million for the expansion of Viva through the Canada Business Plan.

Alleslev, however, felt that a change in structure is what is needed in the Region.

"We need real solutions, not Band-Aids," she said. "A bus up Yonge through Richmond Hill is not the solution. It's only going to get to Highway 7, and get worse. What we need are major projects, perhaps like a subway north of Finch that doesn't interfere with traffic."

While the candidates spoke about their ideas on transportation, small business, and the economy throughout the first half hour with little crowd interaction, it was the topic of personal liberties and security that got the debate heated.

"Personal liberties and security are not two mutually exclusive things," said Menegakis, who was in Parliament's Centre Block with the Conservative caucus last fall when a gunman stormed the building. "The primary responsibility of any government is the protection and security of its citizens. I've lived through a terrorist attack?make no mistake, Canada has been named, by ISIS, ISIL, whatever you want to call them, as a target."

Met by a combination of a short chorus of boos from some and drowning applause from Conservative supporters, it was then that the often outmatched Bowles was his loudest so far.

"Our liberties always come first," said Bowles. "Our security does matter, but we get our hands into too many things and put our own men and women overseas in dangerous situations. We're not focused on solving our own problems in Canada. That should be our first priority."

He brought up Bill C-51, a controversial anti-terrorism bill put in place by the Harper government earlier this summer.

"Bill C-51 needs to be scrapped."

Alleslev added that there was "no question" that the question asked was alluding to the Bill, having mixed feelings about the topic.

"The Conservatives would have you believing that we all have to live in fear, and that we have to take the rights of society over the individual's rights, which is why they have passed C-51," said Alleslev. "The NDP would have you believe that it's only personal security, and not the national interest."

This topic was a perfect segue into that of the current Syrian refugee crisis, currently a hot topic among Federal leaders.

"It's a question of values," said Alleslev. "It's shameful that our European counterparts are doing so much, and what we are doing is marginal in comparison."

Power took a similar stance to the topic, blaming "fearmongering" and "Islamophobia."

"This is a humanitarian crisis," said Ms. Power. "These people are not immigrants, they are escapees."

Once again, it was Menegakis' response that elicited the largest reaction from the crowd.

"We are one of the most welcoming countries in the world," he said. "We work very closely with the United Nations. 42,000 have already come from Iraq and Syria, and over 10,000 is in place to come by September of next year. But we will not do anything at the expense of our people's security, and play the shameful games that the Liberals and NDPs want to play on the backs of our people."

The meeting rounded off with questions from the audience, with over a dozen attendees of all ages lining up to get their turn at the mic. Questions ranged from veterans affairs, to healthcare, and back to the topic of terrorism.