

U.S. election provides very important lessons for Canada, says MP



By Brock Weir

Millions of people around the world were shocked when they saw the results come in following the U.S. Presidential election in November.

But, having been on the scene in North Carolina that day as part of an official delegation observing the election, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leona Alleslev had already seen the writing on the wall.

Ms. Alleslev was in North Carolina in her role as a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Parliamentary Assembly. Teamed with Conservative MP Earl Dreeshen of Alberta, their mission, which included 130 delegates from over 30 nations, was to observe the U.S. election on many fronts, including whether President Elect Donald Trump's pre-victory dismissal of a 'rigged' election held water. (Their findings? It didn't hold water)

'We are very focused on our electoral reform,' Ms. Alleslev tells *The Auran*. 'By being able to observe the American election, where they are using some technology and have situations where you don't even have to show ID to be able to vote, I wanted to be able to understand if that impedes or impacts the democratic process, or supports it, and bring it back to Canada.'

Ms. Alleslev found out she was to be part of the delegation two weeks before the election itself, well past the time the world realised the results were going to be historic, however the chips fell. That, she said, only added to the excitement.

'The two perspectives had visions for the nation were so fundamentally different that regardless of who won, it would be easy to know it was going to be a foundational change,' she says.

Ms. Alleslev says she went into the mission with some concerns about 'rigging' and was keeping a particular eye open for any undue influence at the polling stations. They were sensitive to the possibility, she says, of people at the polling station being 'aggressive' in trying to influence people, but that turned out not to be the case. They observed no instances of people being rejected from exercising to vote because they weren't on the list or weren't able to prove who they were.

'All those fundamental things that perhaps would have influenced an election being 'rigged' because Trump said he wasn't going to accept the election results possibly just heightened the tension and heightened my radar for wanting to make sure I couldn't see anything that was effecting the democratic process,' says Ms. Alleslev.

Before their arrival in North Carolina on the Monday before Election Day, the team convened in Washington D.C. where they were given a crash course on everything from campaign financing, the legal framework guiding elections, media coverage, as well as briefings from pollsters and senior officials from both the Republican and Democratic parties.

'Even then, they were all saying, 'It is going to be close but we pretty much think that the Democrats were going to win,' Ms. Alleslev recalls. 'Yet, from talking to people in the coffee shop and seeing signs and going to polling stations [in North Carolina] I started to think, 'Maybe it is just where I am, but I am not so sure.''

Ms. Alleslev and Mr. Dreeshan began Election Day itself in the outskirts of Raleigh, where they toured polling stations in Jackson

and Wake Counties. At their first polling station in Wake County, they got an hour's run-down of how things worked in that particular seat so they knew exactly what to look for. They split into teams with other observers from Denmark and Sweden and visited polling stations.

She and Mr. Dreeshan mapped out their route and went from station to station telling their equivalent of our poll clerks they were just there to observe at the invitation of the Department of State.

Some were hesitant to let them in, she said, but they only ran into one polling station where they said they were not comfortable having observers on site ? ultimately making observations at five of the six stations on their list.

Among the things they were looking for were lineups and whether there were enough people to support the crowds, waiting times that could frustrate people from exercising their rights, the maintenance of the secret ballot, and the operating logistics of electronic voting.

At the end of the day their findings were compiled and sent to their central mission and, work done, the North Carolina team settled into an area restaurant to take in the returns.

?As you watched the results come in, it was like, ?Wow, okay, this is a very clear message about how Americans in general are feeling and what the impact of the campaign was on those people,?" says Ms. Alleslev. ?Certainly Brexit and the American election have told us something about the economic situation of people and about maybe changes in what one could call the social contract. We say we are inclusive and stronger in our diversity and that is what it means to be Canadians so we don't need to worry about that here [but] I think when people are concerned about their own security and being able to put food on the table and the future of their children's ability to put food on the table, then I don't think you can take anything for granted. I think we really need to understand ? and I don't think we know that now ? where it came from, what the symptoms are, and make sure that we're working today to mitigate those symptoms, so we don't become as polarized and divided as perhaps the Americans have become.?