

Veterans, servicepeople sound off at Liberal roundtable



By Brock Weir

They were looking for an avenue to engage politicians on issues facing today's soldiers, and the grassroots advocacy campaign led by Clayton Goodwin and Eric Rebiere landed at the Aurora Cultural Centre last week as a host of area Liberal candidates held roundtable talks on veterans' issues.

'We came here to engage any party that is willing to stand up and fix veterans' affairs from the actual problems that have been created or seem to have been invented under the Conservative Party of Canada,' said Cpl. Goodwin, who noted their campaign is in its infancy.

By the time of last week's meeting, it was not yet four weeks old but they wasted no time since the writ was dropped to find ways to have their voices heard.

'[The Conservatives] have done austerity measures of \$1.13 billion and this has actually harmed veterans and veterans' families. The programs they have actually put in place never actually see statistics. They just seem to pump out propaganda to say, 'Look at us, everything is good.''

It's a view Mr. Goodwin and Rebiere disagree with, and this sentiment was shared by the local politicians assembled.

Led by Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill candidate Leona Alleslev, herself a retired member of the Royal Canadian Air Force, she was joined by former Minister of National Defence and Veterans' Affairs, and Markham candidate John McCallum, Newmarket-Aurora candidate Kyle Peterson, King-Vaughan candidate Deb Schulte, Vaughan-Woodbridge candidate Francesco Sorbera, and Durham candidate Corinna Traill, who is challenging current Veterans Affairs Minister Erin O'Toole in the riding.

The roundtable discussion was intended as a way to engage local veterans and servicemen and women with recently discussed planks of the Liberal platform for veterans, including the re-establishment of lifelong pensions for injured veterans (which can be accepted either as a traditional pension or a lump sum payment), an \$80 million annual pot to create a Veterans Education Benefit, which panellists likened to the American G.I. Bill, a \$100 million investment to support veterans' families, and the re-opening of nine Veterans Affairs offices closed by the Conservative government.

'I have very close friends who have been affected by their time in the theatre either by physical injuries or post-traumatic stress (PTSD) and I have watched them be unable to get the support they need and, in many cases, they have been ignored or rejected,' said Ms. Alleslev. 'These are not the values of the country I served in the military to defend and it is to return and restore those values to which Canada stands that I am running for office.'

"Our servicemen and women stand for the very best of what it means to be Canadian. They have put their lives on the line for us and that commitment has come at a high cost: 158 members of the Canadian Forces have lost their life during the Afghanistan mission but sadly the suicide tally is even higher with over 170 suicides of service personnel since 2004. Thousands more were wounded or suffer still through PTSD and we owe a sacred trust to our veterans and their families, all of them. It is an obligation we must meet with respect and gratitude."

No veteran, she said, should be "forced to fight" their own government for support and compensation earned and deserved and the restoration of life-long pensions and the other platform planks will go a long way in "honouring their past service" and securing them "a bright future" as they transition to civilian life.

"Future generations of brave men and women should know they will be looked after when they finish their service to Canada," she concluded. "There should never be any doubt in their minds."

Of the approximately 23 guests in the audience, the treatment of veterans and their families was uppermost in their concerns, as well as whether Canada's servicemen and women would return to a peacekeeping role rather than a combat role should the Liberals form the next Federal government.

Above all, they wanted assurances these platform planks were indeed something that could be counted on and the government could afford.

"Every single item we commit to, we do studies on how much it will cost and after we have announced all our major items we will come forward with a complete accounting of everything we have committed to," said Mr. McCallum. "We are in deficit today. Experts say that. The government denies it. When we come to power, you're right, there is going to be a mess. We have had eight deficits in a row, but I would argue [that with] our team of economic people, we are best placed to clean up that mess."