

'We can't divide ourselves right now,' says Aurora MP en route to securities conference

By Brock Weir

By Brock Weir

This week, Leona Alleslev, Member of Parliament for Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill, will be representing Canadian parliamentarians at a NATO-related conference in Paris. Before she left for talks, however, she was clear in her message: 'We can't divide ourselves right now.'

Ms. Alleslev shared her views on NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) with *The Auroran* ahead of the 16th Summer Defence Conference, and said these talks are needed now more than ever.

'We need to remain strong as an alliance,' she said. 'The most important thing about NATO is it is not just a defence alliance, it's an economic and political alliance, and it is about protecting Liberty and the values of democracy and our way of life. That is fundamental.'

Ahead of the event, Ms. Alleslev said she expected one of the top-of-mind issues set to be tackled by the conference to include the European Defence Force.

The local MP was in Belgium earlier this year for a NATO conference in Brussels that was impacted by the comments US President Donald Trump made regarding Europe's commitment to NATO. There are groups within the international body, she says, that are very concerned about where that will leave Europe and European defence.

As such, French President Emmanuel Macron followed that up with a speech saying Europe needs to look after itself and go its own way, focusing on the European Union and the European Union Defence Force, all giving cause for Ms. Alleslev to predict these would be the hot button topics on the Conference table.

'Where is Europe going? From a Canadian perspective, I am quite concerned because I think the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is critically important to Canada because 80 per cent of our GDP is trade [that] goes across the Atlantic,' she said. 'We need security in the Atlantic so that we can receive goods and services from the Europeans and the Europeans can receive it from us. If you look at our northern border, we share a northern border with Russia. Recently, Russia has been more expansionist if you look at what has happened in Georgia and Ukraine. While we want to understand more about what is going on with the European Defence Force because, from a Canadian perspective, we don't want it in any way to compromise NATO and the strength and the need for unity in the alliance because Canada is not a member of the European Union.'

'We are very lucky to be a part of NATO since 1949 and I think this conference will give us a good perspective of what is the tone and feel of perhaps where Europe, or certainly France is going as a next step in the conversation.'

That tone, she added, is just beginning to shift with the Trump administration. When the Berlin Wall came down nearly a quarter century ago, Ms. Alleslev said the world thought 'we had arrived in a new era of peace and security.' That was true at the time, she adds, but 'we're living in a time of unprecedented global instability and seeing fundamental changes.'

'Canada's contribution to defence and security needs to be a more forefront conversation,' she says. 'With the Americans saying they're not sure if we're friends or foes, that was quite a substantive thing to say. With missiles being able to reach Canada, with Russian expansionism in the North Arctic, and climate change, which makes the northwest passage more plausible in the near future, and with hacking and cyberwarfare, the luxury we may have enjoyed from our geographic location is maybe not as secure and safe as it once was.'

'Then, again, the link with trade: people trade with people they feel secure with and they feel trust with. If the Europeans are feeling threatened, the Americans or whatever, part of our commitment to defence is also then part of our commitment to trade. I think the conversation needs to change. I think it's starting to change, but the world that we saw in the mid 90s at the end of the cold war is perhaps not the world that we're in right at the moment.'