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Six D-C candidates take ?Better Ballot Pledge? against personal attacks

Written By MIKE BAKER

With the federal election now less than three weeks away, voters across Dufferin-Caledon had the opportunity to catch their candidates in action for the first time this past week.

All six candidates bidding to become the riding's next Member of Parliament were on hand at Orangeville District Secondary School (ODSS) on Tuesday evening (Oct. 1) to participate in an election forum organized by the Dufferin Board of Trade. It was the second such event held in the riding, with a similar forum in Terra Cotta last Thursday (Sept. 26) having attracted all but one of the candidates seeking to become our next representative in Ottawa.

It would be fair to say that each of the six candidates made an impression on voters on Tuesday, with no clear and obvious winner on the night. All six took a stand on different issues over the course of the night, but perhaps the most important news to come out was the declaration that candidates had agreed to take the Better Ballot Pledge, something the Conservatives' Kyle Seeback addressed in his opening remarks.

?I'm proud of everyone up here, because we have all taken the Better Ballot Pledge,? Mr. Seeback stated. ?That means we're not going to engage in personal attacks, we're going to talk about our policies.?

And that's exactly what they did. Mr. Seeback, Chad Ransom (People's Party), Russ Emo (Christian Heritage Party), Stefan Wiesen (Green Party), Allison Brown (NDP Party) and Michele Fisher (Liberal Party) each took turns explaining not only their party's stance and position on important issues, but their own personal beliefs, too.

Mr. Seeback kicked things off by discussing affordability in his opening speech, later touching on the importance of securing high-speed internet service for rural residents in the riding and, finally, committing to drive democratic reform should he be elected on Oct. 21.

?Everyone is working harder and harder now, yet finding at the end of the month they're not getting any further ahead. It's a big issue here in Dufferin-Caledon, it's a big issue in this country,? Mr. Seeback stated. ?A recent study released (stated) half of Canadian families are within $300 a month of not making ends meet. Their largest costs are taxes.?

In keeping with his new party's mantra, PPC candidate Chad Ransom said it's ?time for change? in the Canadian political arena. He believes the upstart right-wing group, launched by one-time Conservative leadership candidate Maxime Bernier last year, has a little something for everyone in their platform.

?If you're a classic Liberal, you're going to love our stance on free speech. If you're a classic NDP, you're going to love our stance against crony capitalism,? Mr. Ransom noted. ?If you're a Conservative, you're going to love the way we're going to save money, and if you're Green Party, you know we're going to find a solution that saves the environment, not just the climate.?

He too touched on affordability in today's society, noting too many people are caught in the ?vicious circle? of borrowing on a monthly basis just to be able to pay their bills. Mr. Ransom promised the PPC was here to ?give the people back their power, give the people back their money and give the people back their choice?.

Russ Emo of the Christian Heritage Party spent much of his time discussing the importance of establishing a strong family unit at home. Describing himself, and his party, as ?pro-family, pro-life?, Mr. Emo expressed his belief that government needs to put more trust in the general public when it comes to deciding where tax dollars should be spent.

?Strength of family is everything in this country. I grew up in a strong unit. We had tough times, but we were there for each other. I

feel we're losing that each and every day,? Mr. Emo stated. ?Families now not only have both parents working (full-time), but they're often working part-time jobs? just to make ends meet. ?This cycle needs to stop.?

He added, ?We need to put money back into everyone's pockets. It shouldn't be the government's choice of where they spend the money, it should be yours. It's your money, you work hard for that money, why not put it back into your pocket and you decide where it's spent? That's our platform.?

There was big support for Green Party representative Stefan Wiesen on the night. Having grown up in Germany, Mr. Wiesen informed the crowd he always envisioned a career in politics. He went on to explain his ?very simple? platform, which centred on the three P's ? people, planet and prosperity.

?Some say the planet has to come first, I object to that, people have to come first. We people have failed, by and large, to save our planet for the next generation. We have runaway temperature rising, climate crisis, this is something we the people have caused. We have to start with people first,? Mr. Wiesen stated. ?Our democracy is almost broken. We need to fix the bickering, the cycle of one government coming in and doing something, then another government coming in, doing another, and changing things back. We have to get consensus.?

Allison Brown, of the NDP Party, is the only candidate running in Dufferin-Caledon who does not live in the local riding. A registered nurse for the past 30 years, Ms. Brown spent much of her time discussing health care and affordability issues across the country. She pressed home her belief that the foundation of a national pharmacare program would benefit all Canadians moving forward.

?I feel like a soldier, a soldier being called to serve and I'm taking this opportunity to serve where I'm being called. I'm running for people who have sacrificed in their life to help someone do better,? said Ms. Brown. ?As our population ages and with us all living longer, to be truthful, a national pharmacare program will be one of the policies of the 21st century that will affect every Canadian across our nation. You may be blessed with good health right now and not have to rely on medication, but if you ever do need medication, and you're already working two jobs to make ends meet, you could find yourself in a precarious position where you can't afford medication. It's tough. It's not an easy thing.?

Following discussions with residents throughout the riding in recent weeks, Ms. Brown admitted she met many people on low, or fixed incomes who had difficulty finding $4 to pay for the dispensing fee on medications they need to survive.

Speaking last, Michele Fisher suggested she stands the best chance of breaking the near 20-year Conservative hold on Dufferin-Caledon. Sharing her familial ties with politics ? Ms. Fisher's mother was a politician ? Michele also reflected on last week's global climate strike, which saw hundreds of local youth walk out of class to protest issues surrounding climate change.

With 338Canada officially declaring the Dufferin-Caledon riding as a ?toss up? between the Conservatives and the Liberals this week, Ms. Fisher attempted to drive home exactly why a vote for her would be a ?positive move? in the upcoming election.

?I plan to be a very strong advocate for Dufferin-Caledon. A champion for you, a champion for our families and a champion for our community. I'm proud to be running on the Liberal platform. I feel we've done a lot of really good things over the past four years. The fact that Canada, right now, is rated number one in the world for quality of life, there's a reason for that,? Ms. Fisher stated.

?There's still more work to be done, quite a lot of work to be done, as there always is with every government, but I would love dearly to represent you and be that person moving things forward in Ottawa. I truly believe that together, we win.?

Candidates faced six questions on the night. The first centred on each party's plans to resolve trade issues with other countries and how they would go about compensating farmers for lost market opportunities outside of their control. Directly referencing what he described as Canada's ?difficult? relationship with China, Mr. Seeback expressed his belief that the federal government needs to be stronger when it comes to foreign affairs.

?Disputes with China have severely impacted farmers. I had a great meeting with the Dufferin Federation of Agriculture, and they talked about how they're losing access to markets in China. The main problem with that is the way our government has been handling the relationship with China,? Mr. Seeback said.

He added, ?It's time for us to stand up to China and say we're not going to be pushed around. We need access to markets. China is a country that respects strength. It doesn't respect people who continuously let them walk all of you. That's unfortunately what has happened for the past four years.?

Mr. Seeback said the federal government should take ?counter measures? against the Chinese government to better support Canadian farmers, going so far as to suggest that an annual commitment to the tune of $250 million to the Asia Infrastructure Bank, largely controlled and run by the Chinese government, should stop immediately.

Candidates were asked how a basic income program could be supported across Canada. A three-year basic income pilot project, launched by the Wynne government in 2016 and made available to residents in Hamilton, Lindsay and Thunder Bay, was one of the initiatives cancelled by the Doug Ford Progressive Conservative government after it came into power in 2017. Allison Brown noted the NDP has a plan to make life more affordable for low-income families.

?We believe everyone deserves a living wage. The NDP will put in place a federal minimum wage of $15 an hour. That would cover more than 900,000 workers. It would not only help hundreds of thousands of workers, but would also set the national standard for a fair living wage,? Ms. Brown stated.

The lack of options for high speed internet for Dufferin-Caledon residents was discussed after candidates were asked what they would do to improve the service in the riding. It has now been more than four years since SWIFT (Southwestern Integrated Fibre Technology) announced plans to enable to expansion of high-speed broadband networks by lessening the financial burden on service providers that have determined it is too expensive to implement improved Internet infrastructure in rural areas. The organization has so far raised more than $200 million from the provincial and federal governments and the private sector to move forward with its plans to develop that infrastructure, although plans for Dufferin-Caledon are still to be established.

Chad Ransom believes the solution to providing better high-speed internet service to rural residents is to promote competition in the ISP industry.

?When it comes down to it, both (the Conservative and Liberal) governments have had chances to find a solution on this issue and they haven't found one,? Mr. Ransom stated. ?I would like to deregulate the CRTC (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission). I'd like to have an open market, and a free market.?

He added, ?It doesn't only come down to high speed internet. Canadians also pay the most for their cell phone bill in the world. The CRTC and government regulations have stopped Canadians from saving money. It's about time we went to a free market and allow competition to decide who is going to win.?

In one of a few laughs on the night, Stefan Wiesen was afforded the opportunity to be the first candidate to answer a question regarding alternate energy sources available to Canada. He didn't pull any punches, condemning the current and previous governments for what he perceives as their failure to keep up with the rest of the world when it comes to utilizing renewable energy options.

?Canada is at the very bottom of the list of nations, not only industrialized, but also third world, when it comes to renewable energy. We have failed,? Mr. Wiesen remarked, noting only 3.3 percent of Canada's power generation comes from renewable energy sources. ?There is so much we can do on the renewable side, so many different sources not yet explored. We have bioreactors, fuels from renewable resources, but for us, the real power we're missing is infrastructure.?

He added, ?Our electrical grid does not go from east to west. Right now, Quebec produces more hydro than they can use, but it all goes down to the United States. I'm not suggesting we should cut supply contracts with the U.S., but I would like to build a grid (to transport hydro to western Canada). I can't say tomorrow that we will have clean energy, it will take time, but we have the ideas, we have the vision here to transition our economy away from fossil fuels to renewables. It's all highlighted under our Vision Green (plan).?

Homelessness is an issue across practically every community in Canada. Dufferin County and Caledon are no exception. Michele Fisher said a re-elected Liberal government would do its part to provide solutions for the country's most vulnerable residents.

?I hear the waiting list for social housing in this community is 43 years long. One of the solutions for homelessness is providing more affordable housing, social housing and supportive housing for people with disabilities, mental health issues and addiction issues. The only thing we can do, is invest in it,? Ms. Fisher stated. ?The Liberals created Canada's first national housing strategy. We're building affordable housing across the country, but we need to do more. I would like to see us work more with the province and municipalities to get funding in place to create more affordable housing for homeless and low income people across the riding.?

Something of a hot-button topic right now is the child-care crisis in most municipalities in southern Ontario. Candidates were asked what their party would do to address this issue. Taking turns to answer, Ms. Fisher noted the Liberals would provide an additional 250,000 spots for before- and after-school child care across the country, while reducing fees for those programs by 10 percent.

Mr. Seeback highlighted the Conservative Party's history in developing Canada's universal child-care benefit, which helped families offset some of the costs associated with childcare. He noted the Conservatives plan to implement additional tax-free maternity benefits to lighten the load on young families across the country.

Chad Ransom said the PPC would give lower income families $15,000 tax-free when they have a new addition to the family, something that would provide families with options to potentially have a parent stay home with a child, rather than have to make use of child-care.

Stefan Wiesen noted the Green Party doesn't want to set up additional child-care centres across Canada, instead enabling parents to look after their children at home, something echoed by Christian Heritage Party's Russ Emo.

?The CHP believes, first and foremost, parents are the best and should be the primary caregivers of their children. We take our children from the beginning, they don't come with an owner's manual, and we teach them the basics of life. We believe that tax-funded child care is no substitute for that,? Mr. Emo stated. ?Children do best in their homes with their parents teaching them, watching over them and instilling their values into them.?

He added that to make life more affordable for Canadians and allow at least one parent to stay home to care for their children, the CHP would eliminate income tax.

?We feel you know how to work best with your money.?

In closing, Ms. Brown noted the NDP government would invest $1 billion in 2020 and increase annual investments across all Canadian provinces and territories to ensure affordable and quality child-care options are available to all families.

?Nobody should be forced between having a family and having a career,? she stated.

The federal election will take place on Oct. 21.