



Reflections

A Community Forum on Poverty: It's time for the Federal Government to Do Its Part

March 17, 2011 - Town of Ajax (ON) Council Chambers

By Liyu Guo

On a warm sunny Thursday afternoon, in the Town of Ajax Council Chambers, a large crowd gathered in this quiet part of town, just east of the City of Toronto, all drawn by their common interest in poverty and in sharing their personal struggles and views with local candidates representing the four federal parties (Liberal, Conservative, NDP, and the Green).

Over 100 people from local and Toronto areas participated in the lively discussions; some traveled from as far as Ottawa to attend the event. They represented a wide spectrum of concerned citizens (faith communities, unemployed auto workers, community activists, people with lived experience in poverty, single moms with young kids, retirees, students, local elected politicians, daycare workers and young children, etc. etc.) and took the opportunity to listen and express their opinions on key issues of poverty.

Organized jointly by Campaign 2000 (with support from its host Family Service Toronto), Community Development Council Durham, and Make Poverty History, the 2-hour long community forum, moderated by the well-known Toronto Star columnist Carol Goar, served as a pre-election platform where representatives of Canada's leading political parties took turns outlining their poverty-reduction agendas to a public audience and answering pointed questions. Thanks to the Calgary-based Leadwell Foundation, the forum was also broadcast live to more than 30 participants from across the country, some of whom had a chance to ask questions through the online venue. (PERHAPS a photo of the event to go with this, if we can get one from Ligia)

Carol Goar started off the questions with a specific one for each party. The following is a flavour of the discussions:

Question #1 *Why has liberal party lowered its sights since the last election?*

Speaker: Mark Holland (Liberal MP, Ajax-Pickering) - We haven't lowered our sights. It's not just about the economy, we need to give people the opportunity and hope to make sure people are not trapped in poverty. We then reduce crime, and there are more tax-paying citizens.

Question #2 *The Conservative Party repeatedly rejected policies that many people in this room have worked hard on. Does your party have a better plan than those policies?*

Speaker: Chris Alexander (Conservative candidate, Ajax-Pickering) - We have a plan to lift people out of poverty. In 2010, we put forth 1.6 billion for EI plan, we've supported social transfers to the provinces unlike we have ever seen in our lifetime. We haven't caught up fully but under Harper we have done a tremendous amount on social housing and other issues relating to poverty.

Question #3 *Although Tony Martin has put forth a number of policy recommendations, very little has actually been done to improve the situation of people living in poverty.*

Speaker: Trish McAuliffe (NDP candidate, Whitby-Oshawa) - There needs to be political will. He and I build through grass-roots and connect with people in the community. Jack Layton and I went to a community where workers were faced with plant closures. We spoke with front-line workers about what needs to be done. This is how bills are created. There is support for these bills but it is political will today that is needed, we need to increase the amount of NDP leaders in the House of Commons.

Question #4 *How does the Green Party plan to achieve all of their initiatives relating to poverty?*

Speaker: Rebecca Harrison (Green party candidate, Whitby-Oshawa) - We need the support of the federal government. Corporate tax cuts are the weakest option for growth. We want to see infrastructure growth. "We believe the best way to stimulate a country is to stimulate and help the people, and that's what we're going to do."

Other questions touched on a wide variety of issues ranging from poverty facing urban Aboriginal communities, early childhood education and care, affordable housing, working poor, seniors' poverty, guaranteed annual income, to making post-secondary education more affordable and cancellation of the long-form census. At times the debates were heated and some members from the audience expressed frustration at how poverty has not been part of the political agenda for the government. For more info, a podcast and video clips will be made available shortly online at: www.campaign2000.ca