

Public draws blood at All-Candidates debate



By Tony Pearson

Some called it spirited; others called it mean-spirited. Bancroft's all-candidates debate last week drew a crowd, and many in the crowd obviously hoped to draw blood. Many questions were sharp, although the answers were often dull. Questions got longer and some tempers grew shorter as the evening progressed. All in all, it was an entertaining night at the packed Legion Hall last Monday, giving a glimpse into why political debates used to be popular public events.

In their opening remarks, every candidate hit their key message. For incumbent MP Daryl Kramp, it was prudent economic management. For NDP candidate Betty Bannon, it was expansion of social programs. For Liberal candidate Mike Bossio, it was infrastructure investment. And not unexpectedly, for Green candidate Cam Mather, it was environmental protection.

As the debate was convened by the North Hastings Economic Development Committee and the Bancroft Chamber of Commerce, the first question was theirs: how each party might help rural municipalities cope with crumbling infrastructure which will cost more to fix than the towns can afford. All candidates agreed that spending was needed in municipalities to repair and improve capital projects such as roads, bridges, sewers, and internet connections. The NDP's Bannon advocated turning over an additional one per cent of federal gas tax revenue, as well as more funding for tourism. Conservative Kramp noted recent federal grants to local projects, and observed that his government had set up the gas tax transfers. Liberal Bossio pointed to his party's pledge to greatly expand federal spending on infrastructure, including municipal works, social housing and child care, and 'green' technology investment. Green Party rep Mather said an extra five cents on the gas tax should go to municipalities; he also suggested that controlling global warming would prevent huge expenditures to deal with increasing natural disasters like floods.

Economic issues also frequently cropped up in the public question period. Kramp insisted that increasing the overall national debt was saddling today's young people with tomorrow's massive bills: "You can't max out the credit card," he declared. Bossio retorted that without more job-creating investment, there would be less and less employment for youth in future, and stated that Canada was now at the bottom of Western countries in its economic growth rate. People are confident in things like the trading uk market or the job sector in the US but at the moment there are doubts about the economic stability of Canada. Bannon noted that the Conservatives had consistently run up deficits, yet cut back on public services. Mather asserted that bringing in a carbon tax and distributing it to taxpayers would generate local spending and create jobs.

But it wasn't all about the economy. Bill C-51 and the Conservative record on civil rights came under fire from questioners. Kramp, who chaired the Commons committee which approved the legislation, defended it as essential to the security of Canadians. Bossio wanted the bill substantially amended, and eventually repealed. Bannon and Mather favoured immediate repeal. On this issue in particular, some in the audience became very vocal and heated in their opposition to the Harper government.

Other issues covered were services for seniors, health care improvement, and proportional representation in Parliament. Here there was more accord than discord between the parties. All supported increases to the Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors, as well as more affordable housing. The Liberals and NDP favoured returning the age of eligibility for old age pensions to 65. The Green candidate also supported the implementation of a national "Pharmacare" program to make prescription drugs more affordable.

While noting that health care is overwhelmingly a provincial jurisdiction, all parties were for federal financial support; Mike Bossio wanted the support changed from per capita to a needs base. Betty Bannon wanted greater availability of home care, and she and Cam Mather wanted a plan to cope with the growing problem of senior dementia. As for a future voting system, the NDP, Liberal, and Green reps favoured proportional representation, while Conservative Kramp noted that there are advantages and disadvantages, but declared himself open to more debate.

One area of unanimous agreement among the candidates concerned immigration. When asked whether immigration should be halted until there was less unemployment, all four observed that Canada is a nation of immigrants, and that immigrants contributed an overall benefit to our economy. Kramp wanted to ensure that there was general recognition of shared national values. Mather suggested that global action on climate change would reduce the number of "economic immigrants" fleeing starvation due to crop failures.

There were a number of other issues touched on ? alleged Harper ?muzzling' of government scientists, the treatment of Canada's veterans, the use of ?omnibus' bills to push through diverse legislation, government "snooping" on private citizens, and the best system for child care benefits. In summing up, Green rep Mather again stressed the need for environmental improvement measures; Liberal Bossio also mentioned environmental improvement, as well democratic reforms and better treatment of veterans; NDP candidate Bannon emphasised the need for more economic power to the middle and working classes; and Conservative Kramp stressed his service to the riding in delivering programs to benefit the local economy; he also warned that people should check the facts carefully before forming conclusions.

Afterward, observers noted that the meeting was both better attended and more vocal than the one four years ago; some felt there was more uncalled-for rudeness than previously. Town councillor Paul Jenkins felt the questions were good, and former councillor Peter Whitehead thought all candidates gave good explanations of their policies and represented their parties well. And the candidates and commentators thanked moderator Harold Eastman for his conduct of the debate. How many minds were made up or changed remains to be seen.

This was the fifth debate of the campaign, although not all candidates have been at every debate. After Bancroft, the next stop was Madoc. In all, there will be a lot more words to process before the Oct. 19 decision day is at hand.