

## Guelph Conservative Burke takes heat in spirited debate

Greg Layson, Mercury staff

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GUELPH — Guelph Conservative candidate Marty Burke came under heavy fire Wednesday during a debate in the lead-up to the May 2 federal election.

Two of five other candidates participating in the debate at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic high school stopped just short of calling Burke a racist.

"Marty Burke should be pulled out of Guelph. His views aren't his own. His views are those of Stephen Harper. Marty Burke's views are about racism!" Animal Alliance Environment Voters party candidate Karen Levenson shouted.

The accusation drew a collective audible gasp from the crowd. Moderator Joe Tersigni, the teacher who organized the event, abruptly cut her off while audio technicians simultaneously killed her microphone.

Burke had a look of disbelief on his face when Levenson made the remark during the debate and sat stoic when Communist party candidate Drew Garvie made similar comments.

"I didn't expect that in front of our high school students," Burke said of Levenson's personal attack. "But when you're a minor party you can say whatever you want without being held accountable to anyone.

"I'm sure she impressed the 73 people who voted for her last time."

After the debate, Levenson stood by her claim, citing a published letter Burke wrote in 2005. In the letter, Burke described former governor generals Adrienne Clarkson and Michaëlle Jean as "visible minority, immigrant, former CBC commentators with odd husbands."

Levenson called the letter "racist, sexist and nationalist."

"I have to ask why he made those comments," Levenson said after the debate. "And not only did he make them, he took the time to write them down and then send them to newspapers for publication."



**Guelph debate.** Guelph Conservative candidate Marty Burke listens and reacts to a statement made by incumbent Liberal MP Frank Valeriote on Wednesday during an all candidates debate at Lourdes high school. Greg Layson/Guelph Mercury  
Source: Guelph Mercury

After the debate Liberal candidate Frank Valeriote said, "I think Mr. Burke has some explaining to do about comments he's made in the past."

Burke said he expected to be the target of the debate but not to that degree.

Burke previously said his letter to the editor was "observational humour."

Burke said in the post-debate interview he and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney dined with several visible minorities Monday in Guelph.

"There were Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Latinos," Burke said. "We were a different group of people talking about what we have in common. And what we found is that we have lots in common."

During the debate, Green party candidate John Lawson also attacked Burke, who was absent from a similar session Tuesday held at the University of Guelph.

"Where were you yesterday? Why don't you talk with real Canadians and take their questions?" Lawson asked.

"I thought that's what we're doing today," Burke said calmly.

Burke would only say "a personal commitment" prevented his appearance at the U of G.

Valeriote criticized the Conservatives' corporate tax cuts, which the Tories claim will create jobs and stimulate economic growth.

"It's hocus-pocus economics and don't believe it for a minute," Valeriote implored the audience.

Wednesday's debate format included a portion during which candidates could directly ask questions of other candidates.

Burke fielded every one of them, except the one he asked of Valeriote.

"We are the target," Burke said of the Conservatives. "I fully expected a harsh campaign. But politics is a grown-up sport."

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