

## Conservative candidate a no-show at campus debate

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GUELPH — One University of Guelph student organized the all-candidates debate that attracted a capacity crowd on campus Tuesday. But there was also one noticeable absence among the candidates.

The university has recently been the hot spot for election activity in the city, with a vote mob last week attracting a crowd of roughly 500 and sending a collective message to the country that young people are engaged and will vote.

Building on that momentum, Lauren Ramsay, an international development student, got about 175 students out for a debate that included candidates from a number of political stripes — except for a blue one.

"We really pushed to have him present for the debate," said Ramsay, speaking of the absence of Conservative Marty Burke. She was told Burke had previous engagements. Ramsay said she was thrilled by the turnout and by the level of discussion around issues uppermost on the minds of students.

Efforts to reach Burke and his campaign manager Tuesday evening were not successful.

Several candidates chastised Burke for not attending. The Green party's John Lawson said the Conservatives probably sensed that it would not be "a friendly audience," but Burke should have attended and shown the students that he "can take the heat."

Liberal Frank Valeriote put out a news release following the debate in which he called Burke's absence "a stunning show of disregard toward Guelph's young voters." He added that Burke's no-show "confirms that he doesn't care about youth engagement, or about the opinions of the people he wants to represent."

Valeriote praised U of G students for their participation in the democratic process and said that rather than being the future of Canada, "you are our present."

"Just make sure you get out there and exercise your vote in accordance with your conscience," he advised the students.

Despite their range of political leanings, the candidates were mostly agreeable throughout the two-hour event. Issues from job creation to the war in Afghanistan were discussed, with dozens of questions coming from the audience. Candidates agreed that well-educated students should have better employment options than minimum-wage jobs after graduating. Most see future economic prosperity in green technologies.



**Guelph debate.** Guelph federal candidates debate issues on campus Tuesday. From left are, Karen Levenson of the Animal Alliance Environment Voters Party of Canada, the Green party's John Lawson, Drew Garvie of the Communist Party, New Democrat Bobbi Stewart and Liberal Frank Valeriote. Conservative candidate Marty Burke was absent. Rob O'Flanagan, Guelph Mercury Source: Rob O'Flanagan, Guelph Mercury

Communist Drew Garvie said Ontario has been drained of its industrial jobs because of the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and that increasingly the only place for youth to find work is in the service sector. He favours the elimination of free trade agreements and boosting the minimum wage to \$16 per hour, what he called a living wage.

New Democrat Bobbi Stewart said "it is terrible the way we are becoming a McJob society." Canada has lost its manufacturing sector, and federal incentives must be initiated to rejuvenate made-in-Canada products, she indicated.

Several candidates, including Valeriote and Lawson, see future economic prosperity in the green economy, particularly industries and businesses tailored around alternative energy and sustainability.

Karen Levenson of the Animal Alliance Environment Voters Party of Canada, quoting former prime minister Paul Martin, said a sound economy cannot be separated from a sound environmental policy, and that unsound environmental policies under the Conservative government are undermining the stability of the national economy. The candidates all agreed that reducing greenhouse gas emissions and immediately addressing global warming must be government priorities.

Garvie warned that a Conservative majority government would "have catastrophic consequences" for workers, for the poor, for Aboriginal Peoples and the environment.

Lawson said students face a "scary" situation today, with unprecedented student loan debt loads and a lack of good jobs. He said investments in the local economy are crucial. The Green party would invest \$1 billion in municipalities for programs that give young people work experience and educational tax credits. The focus of federal incentives must be redirected from big business to local economies, he argued. The federal government, he said, can find billions of dollars for new prisons and fighter planes, but can't support startup companies with good ideas.

Valeriote said the commercialization of ideas and research must become a priority in this country, and that training must be better aligned with the jobs that are available. It's wrong, he said, that Canada must look overseas for engineers.

Garvie said student debt and student unemployment are at record highs. Many countries offer free post-secondary education, he said, and Canada should think about doing the same.

But Valeriote said such a measure is not possible right now given present fiscal circumstances. But reducing interest rates on student loans, establishing registered educational savings plans, and forgiving \$1,500 in student loans for 150 hours of community service, are programs being put forth by the Liberals.

Stewart said increasing funding for student grants is necessary and something an NDP government would implement.

Canada's traditional and praiseworthy role as a peacekeeping nation has been eroded under the Conservative minority government, Lawson said. He called the situation "a disaster," pointing out that in 2005 there were 1,200 Canadian soldiers working as peacekeepers around the globe, and that number has since shrunk to 56.

"They have completely abandoned our very proud role as peacekeepers," he said, adding that it is doubtful whether the sacrifice Canadian soldiers have made will make a real difference in Afghanistan.

Valeriotte said Canada has a role to play in development and diplomacy in places like Afghanistan and elsewhere in the world. The country has a responsibility to build capacity in the developing world, and to assist with education, infrastructure and the training of defence forces.

"I wish it never happened, but it did," he said of the Afghanistan conflict. While he is not in favour of sending troops into Libya, the creation of a no-fly zone has served to create a "level playing field" to help prevent a massacre in the country, he said.

Following the debate, a number of students commented that they were proud of the efforts the U of G student body is making to generate interest in the campaign and in voting.

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