Fringe candidates want their say on TV debate

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

Markham's fringe candidates are livid they weren't included in a recent debate hosted and broadcast by Shaw Cable — and one of them has not only filed a formal complaint with the CRTC but is also considering legal action.

Independent Akber Choudhry is incensed Monday's candidates' debate on the local cable channel included only those running for Canada's four mainstream political parties — the Liberals, the Canadian Alliance, the Progressive Conservatives and the New Democrats.

Three others — Bernadette Manning of the Green Party, Jim Conrad of the Canadian Action Party and Choudhry were told only those parties currently holding seats in Parliament were invited.

"They cannot act as censors and decide who are the best representatives for people in a federal election," Choudhry said. "If the independent voice cannot be heard, how can voters make a truly informed decision?"

In his complaint, Choudhry cites Canadian Radio and Television Commission regulation 334 which states:

"It is the broadcaster's duty to ensure that the public has adequate knowledge of the issues surrounding an election and the position of the parties and candidates. The broadcaster does not enjoy the position of a benevolent censor who is able to give the public only what it should know. Nor is it the broadcaster's role to decide in advance which candidates are worthy of broadcast time."

Shaw Cable news director Carmen Salerno was out of the province Friday and unavailable for comment. He has offered to record a stand-alone, three-minute speech by each candidate, but they have not been told how or when those spots will run. Choudhry said he's considering suing Shaw Cable for the "irreparable harm" done to his campaign as a result of not being included.

"The broadcast laws are very specific," Choudhry said. "Shaw has a duty to inform its viewers and never more so than during an election."

Manning said not only was the decision wrong, it's undemocratic.

"All candidates means all candidates," she said. "People are all paying their cable fees and they have a right to know about each of the candidates in their area. I just think it's so important — our health care system is in a shambles, education is in a shambles, the environment is deteriorating every day. People should know there are candidates who want to protect life, the water, the air, the foodland."

Jim Conrad, of the Canadian Action Party, said besides this one incident, he has been treated fairly well by the media.

"Sure it's unfair to not have all the candidates," he said. "It's not democratic at all."

Board hosts candidates

Voters have their chance to quiz their federal election candidates Monday night during a debate sponsored by the Markham Board of Trade.

Seven candidates are vying for your vote this election and they are:

The all-candidates debate is an opportunity to meet the men and women who want to be your representative in Ottawa. They will discuss both national and local issues and answer your questions. The evening will be moderated by Markham Board of Trade chairperson Alan Direnfeld.

The debate runs from 7 to 9 p.m., Monday, Nov. 20 at the Crystal Fountain Banquet Hall, 60 McDowell Gate (14th Avenue, west of Kennedy Road).

For more information call 474-0730.

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