

Justice issue fades in race

Voters not asking for more cops, candidates say

BY JEFF MITCHELL
Staff Writer

When the leaders of Ontario's three main political parties met for a televised debate last week, they tangled on issues ranging from taxation to health care to gay marriage.

Notably absent from the discussion were topics that have in the past been central to party platforms: public security, policing and justice.

"I'm not really hearing much about justice issues," said Adrian Visentin, the Green Party candidate in Vaughan-King-Aurora.

Not one person has discussed safety and security at the door," concurred Pamela Courtot, who's hoisting the NDP colours in Oak Ridges.

That doesn't mean justice-related issues have dropped off the radar screen. Last Monday in Newmarket, a ratepayers' group polled candidates on their support for a plan to increase the number of officers patrolling the streets in York Region.

Not surprisingly, the MPP wannabes were in favour of more cops. Liberal hopeful John Taylor thundered, "I won't rest until I know York North has got its fair share."

The Liberals and Conservatives share similar platforms this time around: More cops and a court system that's responsive when charges are laid.

The Liberals have vowed to hire more prosecutors to move cases through what is now a slow and complex system; the Tories are touting their traditional line about the rights of Ontarians to safety and security. Carmine Iacono, the PC candidate in Vaughan-King-Aurora, said a continued tough stance will help address the fears people may feel about an increasingly threatening world.

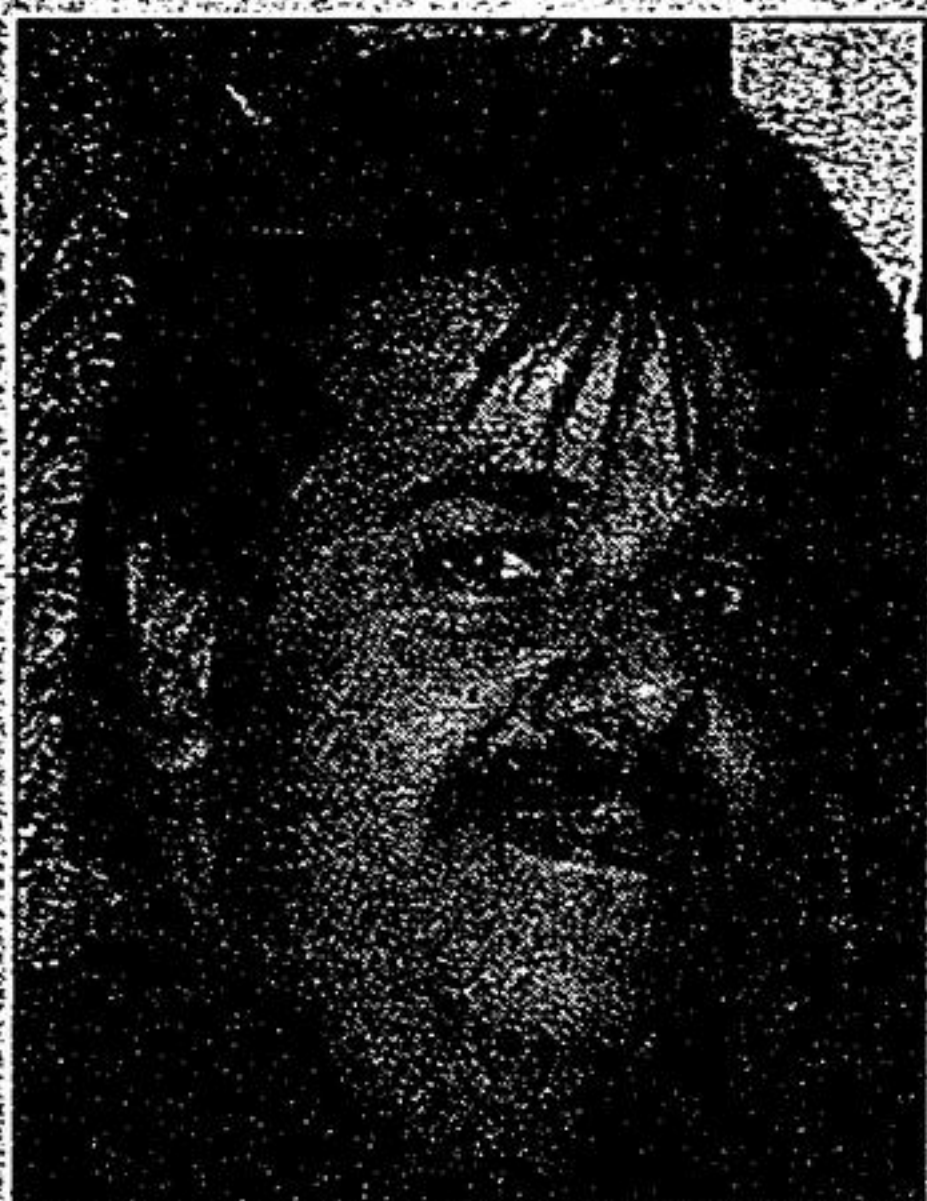
Mr. Iacono, a lawyer and judge, preaches a credo of "strict, severe and swift" administration of justice.

"(Voters) want to hear that," Mr. Iacono said.

"As I'm out there knocking on doors and listening to people,



JOHN TAYLOR: York North Liberal candidate won't rest until region has its share of policing.



CARMINE IACONO: Vaughan-King-Aurora Tory candidate touts party's plan to put more police on street.



ADRIAN VISENTIN: Vaughan-King-Aurora Green Party candidate says prevention key to reducing crime.



PAMELA COURTOT: Oak Ridges NDP candidate blames Tories for preying on people's fears.

they're talking about concerns about growth in the area about an anticipated rise in crime," Mr. Iacono said.

He touts the Tory plan — echoed by the Liberals — to put 1,000 more cops on the street.

But that plan has been dismissed as "window dressing" by the head of the local police union.

John Miskiw said the provincial initiative will amount to, at best, a few more cops on patrol in York. The union has cited a need for at least 200 new officers.

He's calling for stepped up efforts to increase the number of officers working streets here through aggressive recruitment and increased capacity at the Ontario Police College in Aylmer.

Citizens have seized upon that message and launched Project 700, the goal of which is to boost the police-to-population ratio to one officer for every 700 residents, an improvement over the 1,890 level that now exists.

Brian Patterson, who is heading the effort, said the province needs to show leadership in the form of initiatives and funding.

"Over the last 10 to 12 years, the region has completely ignored policing issues," Mr. Patterson said. "Maintaining the police to population ratio is critical."

Hiring the officers necessary to create the 1:700 ratio would cost an estimated \$16 million.

Mr. Patterson said police should be considered a necessary part of growth and funded as such, much the way new development is required to pay for roads, sewers and parks.

"We want the province to set



a standard for policing," Mr. Patterson said.

"The province has to provide the additional resources to make that work."

It's one thing to catch crooks and lay charges; the other side of the equation involves the people who are affected, according to victims advocate Joe Wamback.

"The real pain of crime is not suffered by society in general; it's suffered by victims," Mr. Wamback said.

The Newmarket resident, who rose to national prominence with his fight for justice after the vicious beating of his teenaged son, is no stranger to politics. He made an unsuccessful bid under the Tory banner in the 2000 federal election.

Now operating outside the constraints of the political spectrum, he has launched the Canadian Crime Victims

Foundation, a registered charity that will provide emotional and financial support for victims and lobby for legislative change to benefit those affected by crime.

While some gains have been made during the last eight years of Conservative rule in Ontario, including the establishment of a Victims' Bill of Rights and court-based services for victims, there

is much more to do, Mr. Wamback contends.

Victim support is still lacking and that shortfall is exacerbated by a justice system that does not properly punish those convicted of crimes," he said.

"We have a judicial system that seems to be ignoring punitive (sentences) for crimes — even serious crimes — and a prison system that seems determined to allow criminals back into society as soon as possible," Mr. Wamback said.

"We're becoming very complacent. And it's that complacency, I believe, that is becoming fundamental in the proliferation of crime."

Mr. Visentin, meanwhile, said prevention is the best way to reduce criminal behaviour, especially among young people. His party has embraced the principles of the federal Youth Criminal Justice Act, enacted in April of this year.

That legislation favours diversion and alternative sentencing to jail time for non-violent offenders.

"If you commit a non-violent crime, your sentence should be steered more toward restorative justice," Mr. Visentin said.

"Your crime is against the community; basically, your sentence will be to pay back the community."

Mr. Visentin said a firm but compassionate approach must be taken, especially with youth, who would benefit more from facing up to their actions than becoming involved in a court system, which, through delays and legal wrangling, actually distance a youth from his or her crime.

"Facing up to the person or

community harmed by illegal actions may have more impact on a non-violent offender, Mr. Visentin argued.

"The justice system is not only about punishment," he said. "It's also about rehabilitation."

Ms. Courtot, meanwhile, said politicians who bluster about crime and punishment are often playing on people's fears to avoid scrutiny on more complex issues of social justice.

"Our violent crime rates are pretty well stable," she said. "I really do think this is a red herring, it's fear mongering."

Ms. Courtot targets the Tories, who in the eyes of some have lumped immigrants together with criminals in the present platform, as the chief perpetrators of the them-against-us school of politics.

"They have managed to find themselves a constituency that wants to believe that," Ms. Courtot said. Other targets have included the poor and teachers, she added, characterizing this "demonization" as a diversionary tactic by a government that slashed social spending to usher in tax cuts.

"It's always nice to have some kind of scapegoat for one's own perceived failures," she said.

The same holds for the culture of crime and punishment that prevails at Queen's Park, Ms. Courtot added.

"I think it's a penny-wise, pound foolish approach to just talk about building more private jails and cut funding for special education and children's mental health services," she said.

"Let's talk about the kinds of things we can do to build a strong society."

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