

Creating Election Excitement: All-Candidates Poverty Forum in Abbotsford

Caledon's 'community snapshots' present brief overviews of promising new initiatives founded by Vibrant Communities and other local organizations.

Challenge

Finding ways to reignite passion and interest in elections is one of the key democratic challenges of the decade. As issues become increasingly complex, voter engagement statistics show ever lower levels of citizen involvement. Voter turnout at BC provincial elections has declined steadily from 71 percent in 1983 to 50 percent in May 2009.¹

Strategy

Conversation cafés have become a popular way to engage people in deep level discussion of important issues. Imagine a room filled with nine-person tables, each with seven 'guests,' a moderator and a 'host.' Guests or hosts may move from table to table at set intervals. Think: speed-dating for focused conversation. Enough time is given to explore the host's views on a pre-selected topic and for the guests to ask clarifying and probing questions. The exchange of information allows both sides to increase their understanding of the other's viewpoints. As the café progresses, questions move from general topics to more specific ones. The structure discourages grandstanding; conversations that drift off track can be quickly redirected to the discussion questions

Vibrant Abbotsford partnered with Abbotsford Community Services and the Abbotsford Early Childhood Committee to host an All Candidates Poverty Forum on May 5, 2009, a week ahead of provincial elections. They chose a central location with good public transportation access and arranged to have refreshments on hand. Candidates received the agenda – with themes and questions – one day before event. A general agenda was e-mailed with invitations to

groups across the city and sent out as part of a press release package. Abbotsford's community newspapers made special note of the forum.

Upon arrival, guests and speakers were provided with a poverty fact sheet, and were randomly assigned a table colour to ensure well-mixed groupings. Political assistants were asked not to sit with their candidates. Each table was assigned a volunteer recorder to keep notes on the conversational themes that emerged.

Seven candidates – the two incumbent Liberals, one each from the NDP and Conservative parties, two Green and one independent candidate – acted as table hosts and 65 citizens were their guests. The Master of Ceremonies set the stage for the evening's discussions by introducing two poverty statistics: 34 percent of Abbotsford's children are entering school without the skills they need to succeed; BC has the highest rate of child poverty in Canada.

Table conversations began around three poverty-related questions: What is poverty? What is the government's role in poverty reduction? How does the candidate's party plan to address the multiple factors associated with poverty, such as the minimum wage and social assistance? After 45 minutes, the group moved into themed conversations about children in poverty, poverty's impacts on literacy, immigrant poverty and the working poor.

Outcomes

Candidate and citizen response to the Abbotsford conversation café was overwhelmingly positive. They felt that the café environment allowed for safe, open exploration of a complex subject. Glimpses of the personal became a first step to building mutual understanding and insight. Some of the participants were disappointed that the evening's conclusions about poverty were not captured in a plan for future dialogue and action by the elected party.

As participants left the meeting hall, they were encouraged to sign up for Vibrant Abbotsford newsletters. In this way, Vibrant Abbotsford and its forum partners helped build a constituency for future events and ensured that the conversation and lessons learned were reported and shared among their networks. Organizers plan to hold a conversation café for federal elections in order to continue the process of educating the electorate and candidates about poverty issues and their impact on community life.

Just as three groups jointly planned the café, poverty reduction must be worked at collaboratively across sectors and involve as many residents as possible. The conversations in Abbotsford brought home a sharper awareness that poverty is affecting every member of the community – either directly or as citizens concerned about the overall health of their community.

Plans for the future include devising some way of measuring whether conversation cafés increase voter turnout. Particular attention will be paid to groups that show consistently low voter participation (e.g., middle-income earners). Though they did not attend the café, many

members of Abbotsford's large Indo-Canadian community sent e-mails and telephoned for information about the candidates before election day. This group had built considerable support for a doctor who, ultimately, ran unsuccessfully, largely because community members did not make the link between expressing support and casting a ballot. Future educational events will help increase understanding of voting processes.

Vibrant Abbotsford is working to develop a citizens' action group – a diverse collection of people living in poverty. Café organizers' wish would be to have candidates of every stripe and level – municipal, provincial, federal – take a couple of hours to sit, listen and engage with this group in order to learn about the everyday realities of poverty. Conversation requires listening and speaking – sharing a cup of coffee can be a powerful first step in building true understanding.

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Endnote

1. On May 12, 2009, B.C. Liberal Leader Gordon Campbell won a third straight mandate and the party received 46.1 percent of the 1,545,716 ballots cast, taking 49 of 85 seats. The NDP secured the remaining 36 seats.

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