

Local groups say affordable housing, childcare should be priorities for re-elected Beaches-East York MP Erskine-Smith ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Elected for the third time in a row as the MP for Beaches-East York in last month's federal election, Nathaniel Erskine-Smith said his priorities as a member of the minority Liberal government will include finishing the fight against COVID-19 from both a health and economic recovery perspective.

"The first priority is to finish the fight against COVID-19, including continued support for new vaccinations and booster shots, and an expansion of rapid testing," he said in an interview with Beach Metro News last week.

"We then need to prioritize the recovery, and that work will include serious climate action, strengthening both our healthcare system and social safety net, delivering affordable housing and child care, and advancing reconciliation."

Erskine-Smith was re-elected in Beaches-East York in the Sept. 20 federal election, winning more than 56 per cent of the votes cast.

He has held the riding since 2015 after defeating former NDP MP Matthew Kellway. In 2019, Erskine-Smith was re-elected after winning more than 57 per cent of the total votes cast in Beaches-East York.

This will be the second minority Liberal government in a row of which Erskine-Smith is a member of the ruling party.

He said he hopes to see a greater sense of co-operation on numerous shared priorities from during this minority government's tenure, including "ambitious climate action."

"(I hope) that we all put aside political posturing and get back to work in a serious and competent manner," said Erskine-Smith.

The issues of affordable housing and homelessness in Beaches-East York were hot topics before and throughout the election campaign.

"To eliminate chronic homelessness, we need to keep adding units through the rapid housing initiative and maintain increased funding for community support programs. We will also appoint a new Federal Housing Advocate to ensure this work is seen through," said Erskine-Smith.

On a broader scale, he said the Liberals are committed to stabilizing the housing market through policies such as the new accelerator fund that will encourage cities like Toronto to build, supply, and adopt inclusive zoning, and "measures to reduce demand by curbing speculation and the excessive financialization of the market."

He also said that first-time homebuyers will be supported through initiatives including a new tax-free first-home savings account.

On election night, Erskine-Smith said that he "heard the feedback loud and clear" that many Canadians were frustrated with Trudeau's decision to call a snap election in the middle of August during a global pandemic.

The election call was criticized by many as a cynical attempt to try and gain a Liberal majority government. That did not work as the seat counts changed very little from 2019, and the Liberals were returned with a minority government.

The political landscape of the country did not see many significant changes, and Beaches-East York NDP candidate Alejandra Ruiz Vargas said the election shouldn't have happened in the first place.

"The election shouldn't have happened, but it happened. This wasn't necessary in the pandemic," she said.

Ruiz Vargas said that on a national level, she hopes that the NDP pushes the Liberals on issues such as climate change and affordable housing, and healthcare including pharmacare.

"On climate change...(it's been) six years of a slow process that brought us to nowhere. Even though the carbon tax made some progress, it's not enough and we can't rely on that. The NDP needs to really challenge the government," she said.

Affordable housing is an issue Ruiz Vargas said is very close to her heart, and she wants to see it made a national priority. "It hasn't been a

priority for many years...that needs to change. In my personal view, it was a bitter part of the election because we've seen a government that had six years to do something about it and they did very little, like a drop in the bucket," she said.

Ruiz Vargas said she also wants to see universal pharmacare for all, including vision and dental coverage, and that these initiatives would be welcomed "in a heartbeat."

Locally, Ruiz Vargas said she hopes Erskine-Smith will prioritize issues such as support for undocumented workers, and affordable housing.

"He should be looking into how he can bring affordable units to Beaches-East York...He mentioned in the debate that Liberals had the best platform, so now he needs to show it," she said.

Ruiz Vargas also said that hope needs to be brought to the Indigenous community through Truth and Reconciliation efforts.

Community groups agree that many of the issues identified by Erskine-Smith and Ruiz Vargas are critically important to local residents.

Bill Sinclair, CEO of the Neighbourhood Group, said he's excited to see a focus on childcare and affordable housing through the National Childcare Plan and National Housing Strategy. Sinclair said there needs to be more affordable and modular housing to meet the needs of the community.

"At The Neighbourhood Group, we've offered housing on Kingston Road for seniors and for families for over 30 years and we're excited to see more housing being built by the city or other groups to create good-quality, affordable housing for people and supportive housing," he said.

Sinclair referenced \$10 a day childcare in Quebec, saying that affordable childcare would make a huge difference to local residents and the economic vibrancy of the community.

"The Neighbourhood Group works with lots of parents who are looking for affordable childcare, and this is the second or third time the government has talked about a National Childcare Plan that they've always not delivered in the past. We're very excited that hopefully with this win that they would be able to deliver on that election promise," he said.

Sinclair said he'd also like to see a focus on enhanced employment insurance and supports for people who have lost their jobs, and continued support for small businesses.

"I think small businesses are suffering terribly during COVID, and a lot more focus on keeping our main streets vital and alive, and we don't want empty storefronts, we don't want small businesses and family businesses going under. So I think everyone agrees that they would like to see more supports for local small businesses," he said.

Sinclair said on a national level, he'd like to see the Liberal government address climate change, responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, and recognition for local volunteers and their work during the pandemic.

Michelle German, vice president of policy and strategy at WoodGreen Community Services, said that they're also excited about the national childcare strategy.

"At WoodGreen we operate a bunch of childcare centres across the city and work with many families. So the issue of childcare that's safe, reliable, and affordable has been an issue for our clients and staff throughout the pandemic. Looking forward, if we're going to have a healthy community, families need more support," she said.

German said WoodGreen is hoping to see some policy solutions in the next government's mandate. They want to work with the federal government, and see pilots in Toronto where there is a great need for affordable childcare. She also said the next wave of challenges faced by local residents will be issues related to mental health. German said a robust mental health strategy is something WoodGreen is hoping to see better funded through partnerships with primary care and agencies.

"It's a huge local issue. Our phone lines, like our seniors' helpline, for example, have exponentially grown throughout the pandemic, and that's seniors mostly living independently...who need support from community agencies. More times than not, it's mental health support that they're looking for," said German.

She said the issue is national but also hyper-local, and that it's impacting the functionality of work, families, and seniors, and that a fleet of services and support are needed.

On affordable housing, German said COVID-19 sped up a lot of the initiatives the National Housing Strategy was trying to achieve.

"At WoodGreen we've been happy to participate in the rapid housing initiative...We think that it's put a lot of wind in the sails of addressing affordable housing and homelessness in a way that we haven't quite had in the past," she said.

"The community understands that need; there's not much opposition as there often can be. The hiddenness of homelessness and communities and how they're struggling got brought to the forefront and I think it really galvanized compassion in Toronto and especially the east end that will be productive in the coming years."

In the 2021 federal election, Beaches-East York saw a voter turnout of 65 per cent, with 51,456 of 79,102 electors casting their ballots.

In the Sept. 20 election, NDP candidate Ruiz Vargas was second with 22.5 per cent of the vote.

In third was Lisa Robinson with 14.4 per cent of the vote. Her name was on the ballot as the Conservative candidate but the party dropped her prior to election day due to Islamophobic comments linked to an alleged former Twitter account. Robinson has stated the account was

not hers and she was the victim of a smear campaign.

People's Party of Canada candidate Radu Ratescu was fourth with 3.2 per cent of the vote, while Green Party candidate Ruben DeBoer received 2.7 per cent of the vote. Rounding out the vote percentage results were the Communist Party's Jennifer Moxon and Independent candidate Karen Lee Wilde with 0.3 per cent of the vote, respectively, and Marxist-Leninist Philip Fernandez with 0.1 per cent of the vote.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: federal election 2021 ^[4]

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