

Orangeville resident's petition counters Tilson's on refugees

By Tabitha Wells

Earlier this month, Dufferin-Caledon MP David Tilson tabled a petition seeking an emergency Commons debate on the Liberal government's settlement plan for refugees. Originally said to have over 100 signatures, the petition actually had only 65, from local residents who were not on board with the plan to resettle 25,000 immigrants.

Mr. Tilson explained part of the concern was the goal to resettle 25,000 immigrants by December 31. However, the government had already extended the period, stating that only 10,000 could be resettled by the end of the month. The move by Mr. Tilson has sparked concerns amidst some local residents, being called both pre-emptive, as well as uninformed. One resident, local musician Stewart Gunn, decided to create his own petition countering the concerns.

"The idea started after I read the story about Tilson tabling the petition," explained Mr. Gunn. "Essentially, the whole thing made me really irritated. Tilson presenting the petition seemed like more of the same politics he engaged in during the campaign."

He added with only 65 signatures, the petition did not represent the majority of Canadians, particularly not the majority of Dufferin County residents.

"There has been a shift in the public's will," said Mr. Gunn. "As Canadians, we want to help people, we want to help those in need. I wanted to create a space where people could share their words and support for the refugees."

But the petition is about more than asking Mr. Tilson to reconsider and table this second list - it's about the impact negative attitudes about their arrival will have on the refugees who have been sponsored by local groups.

"It's not a nice feeling when refugees show up, after having travelled that far, and feel like the community doesn't want them there," said Mr. Gunn. "It would be hard for them. I can't make Tilson change his mind with this petition, but I can help the public to see that there is a common voice to see the refugees resettled."

Mr. Gunn attributes much of his drive to see the refugees helped and welcomed to his being a father. He has two kids of his own, and said that when he reads things in the papers about what's happening in the war-torn countries, it makes him think of what it would have been like.

"When I hear these stories, all I can think about is when my kids were little, and what it would have been like trying to pack them up with our pets, whatever stuff we could fit in our car, and just leaving everything," he said. "To look at your children and know you might not be able to help them survive. It just connects with me as a parent."

That's exactly how it happened for many of these refugees, packing up and fleeing in the middle of the night to Jordan, Turkey, and other countries bordering Syria, to seek amnesty from the terrors they were facing.

"Some of these families have been living in hiding and in camps for four years, which means some of these kids may have lived half or all of their lives in camps and as refugees," said Mr. Gunn. "That breaks my heart."

This particular petition calls on Mr. Tilson to support the expedited resettlement of refugees in Canada, and to present the petition as he did with the petition that has just 65 signatures.

Currently, the goal on Change.org is listed as 500 signatures, but Mr. Gunn explained that there is no set number of signatures he is trying to achieve.

"When you start the petition on Change.org it just automatically set goals, but each time you reach them, it bumps it up," he said.

?The petition will continue to grow; it will not close.?

Mr. Gunn launched it online last Monday, and within 24 hours it had already grown to over 100 signatures. Last Tuesday, he presented the petition as it stood to Mr. Tilson's office, even though it's still receiving signatures.

?I wanted them to see that we were able to get that many in just one day,? he said. ?The more people keep talking about it, the more people are being made aware, the more people are going to keep signing.?

Mr. Gunn added that he feels that Mr. Tilson should have known better about the issues he was tabling the petition on.

?David Tilson was the chair for the standing committee on Refugees and Immigration, which means he knows about all the security clearance the refugees are going through,? he said. ?The security vetting is already being done by CSIS and the RCMP, who have both said that they feel there is no issue with the timeline. If Tilson has doubts about these institutions and their capabilities, he needs to come out and say that..?

When it comes down to it, the petition is just one way to try and fight something that is bigger than most of us ? about humanity, and fear.

?The more caring we are, the more we help, the less likely we are to be attacked,? said Mr. Gunn. ?The more we talk about people who aren't dangerous as if they are dangerous, the more we create terrorists.?

He strongly believes that this battle is about an idea, and an idea isn't something you can fight with weapons.

?It is an idea that continues to spread quickly as long as we keep making it about us vs them,? he said. ?We need to heal; this isn't about one race vs another, one believe vs another, it's about one human against another. And as long as we think about it as us vs them, we will keep having wars.?

Although sometimes he finds there are people that cause him to lose hope, when he sees things like the number of people who have signed and commented on his petition, it restores his hope.

?It restores the idea that there are more people who want to see positive change,? said Mr. Gunn. ?I think that most people want to be a part of a community, fit in, and want to know their family is safe. They want to be somewhere they can work, and educate their families. That is all these refugees are hoping for.?

The petition can be signed online at chn.ge/1mfCz4N. As of the time this article was submitted for print, the petition already had 414 signatures.