

The lonely red Tory

Written By LAURA CAMPBELL

As many of you know, I was a candidate in the most recent provincial election. It was a wonderful experience because I love talking about politics; I had many great conversations with citizens from all political stripes about the issues we face as a society. Not a single one of them denied climate change. Not a single one of them believed that a major priority was cheaper beer. And yet we now have a government who engages with the climate crisis by ignoring it, and instead has laid out of bold and visionary plan for 'buck a beer.' Apart from the fact that this legislation is completely perfect fodder for comedy, it is also fundamentally at ideological odds with what true conservatives champion.

It is government intervention in the free market (which of course, governments always do, and have done since the Second World War, Conservative and Liberal alike). But shouldn't a progressive conservative government aim at scaling back such interventions? We aren't at war. Beer is not butter. Or wheat. Or milk.

Given that Dufferin-Caledon is and always has been a very conservative riding, it is not surprising that most of the people I talked to were conservatives. The most common label they assigned to themselves was: 'Red Tory' or 'Bill Davis Tory.' They'd say to me they were socially liberal and fiscally conservative, which is classical liberalism and code for: Government, stay out of our lives and our pockets!

So then what are these folks to make of our new Premier's priorities? Do they feel their party has been hijacked? I'm genuinely curious about their perceptions. Our government has made some pretty significant decisions since coming to power: cancelled renewable energy contracts well into project development, no more basic income pilot, less money for mental health services, and abandoning an evidence-based sex-ed curriculum that students were always entitled to opt out of, if they had religious objections of one kind or another. I could go through each of these points and explain how these decisions don't really represent conservative values, based on what I understand about the history of the party, and the members I have spoken to. But I'm more interested in something else: has Doug Ford perhaps sparked an identity crisis for the 'Red Tory'?

It's possible. And why then, continue to vote that way if the leadership of the party and much of its new membership is driving it in a populist direction, increasingly removed from conservative roots? In this riding in particular, there are many things that explain a strong conservative vote: 1) Our popular MPP Sylvia Jones, who is a self-described policy wonk, is very engaged in the community and advocates strongly for her riding. A solid centrist, she is experienced and hard-working. But also 2) it is nearly a silent rule that family tradition leads the way here. Generations have voted that way, and the children follow suit. 3) Desire for revenge for years of Liberal scandal, bordering on hysteria. 4) What it means to define yourself as a conservative. This last point I'm the most interested in.

There is a silent majority in the Conservative Party that likely wished for a different outcome in the PC leadership race. They favoured Christine Elliott or even Caroline Mulroney. Broadly speaking, these Red Tories are the men and women who equate their political allegiance with their place in the world: to be a conservative shows that you are successful in life- it is central to their identity. They don't need government help, but they aren't against helping the needy, as long as social assistance is delivered in the most efficient way. Beyond social assistance, indeed, in every sphere of governance, Red Tories believe government should take best practices from the private sector and build policy around those principles.

Both during the election and since, I wonder if Red Tories feel abandoned? Other than the latest announcement that pot sales would be taken over by the private sector (a smart move and one that us Greens have been advocating from the start), what sort of efficiencies has this government proposed? The Basic Income Pilot was a project that could have overhauled social assistance. Studies in academic circles working on public policy show that for a 21st century economy, a Basic Income is much less costly to administer than our existing programs, and truly helps people get back to work. It's an approach that should please both social justice advocates like me, and Progressive Conservatives alike. That's why I was truly dumbfounded when the announcement came that the project would be cancelled.

There's no rhyme or reason to the slash and burn approach of our current government. They want to clean house, they say. But what are they building? There are quite a few places where I think Red Tory good sense would be welcome.

Just last week, a gentleman in line behind me at Zehrs was prevented from buying his six-pack of beer because it was 6:01PM. Had he squeezed in front of me, his day off could have been far more relaxing. Why not sell beer until the store closes? That's the kind of beer policy all progressive conservatives should get behind.

So where are these seemingly lonely oldschool Tories to go? What are they to do? There are other political homes for them, true. But ultimately, at some point, they'll have to take their party back. History teaches us that simple austerity measures from the 1980s

playbook simply won't fix this debt. Even the IMF and the World Bank understand that. Red Tories do too. Let's hope they can communicate that to their Premier.

Laura Campbell was a candidate for the Green Party in Dufferin-Caledon.