

Conservatives to hold second D-C nomination meeting

Written By **MIKE BAKER**

The Conservative Party of Canada has decided to initiate a do-over in Dufferin-Caledon, announcing a brand new nomination process to find a replacement for retiring MP David Tilson.

The move brings an end to weeks of rumours and uncertainty in the local federal riding, which is still reeling from the news that Harzadan Khattra, who won an initial nomination vote held on March 19, did so with the help of illegitimate voters. He was officially removed as the riding's Conservative candidate on April 25.

There has been a growing feeling locally that Dufferin-Caledon has been left in the lurch by the Conservative Party's executive, with 49 days having passed between Mr. Khattra's removal and the announcement of a new nomination. While some prominent members, including potential candidates to replace Mr. Tilson, have claimed this delay has put the Party behind the eight-ball in Dufferin-Caledon, Cory Hann, Director of Communications for the Conservative Party of Canada, indicated the executive had no choice but to take their time in order to ensure the correct decision was made.

Following input from members, our elected National Council, the party, and our Leader, the decision was made to have a new nomination, Mr. Hann told the Citizen. Obviously disallowing a candidacy is never a decision we take lightly, and as we said at the time, we were going to take the time to determine what the best next step would be. After that consultation I mentioned, the best step was to hold a new nomination.

The nomination meeting held in March was marred with several issues. Alongside the illegitimate voters who were allowed to cast their ballot, there were numerous members who actually held a valid Conservative Party membership who were turned away from voting. When asked what the Party was doing to ensure those issues don't repeat themselves during this new process, Mr. Hann dropped the ball at the feet of the potential candidates seeking nomination.

As with all of our nominations, we expect a fair race from all eventual candidates, and we're going to ensure that remains the case in Dufferin-Caledon. Candidates owe it to the members there to play by the same rules everyone else has to, and we'll ensure that, Mr. Hann stated.

The Citizen has thus far confirmed that at least four individuals will seek the nomination. Three of them will be familiar to local voters, with Kevin Weatherbee, Barb Shaughnessy and Jeremy Williams each stating their intent to run, again, in this new process. Former Brampton West MP Kyle Seebach has also confirmed he plans to run.

Three of the four potential candidates (Ms. Shaughnessy, Mr. Williams and Mr. Seebach) were in attendance at a Dufferin-Caledon Conservative Association board meeting, held at Innis Glen Farm on Monday evening. There, it was revealed the Board, which was operating outside of its mandate having failed to meet a mid-June deadline to host an AGM to elect new members, had been granted a stay by the Party's head office. Dave Dillon, Regional Organizer for Southwestern Ontario, was on hand to deliver the news.

Local Association President Jennifer Innis confirmed the continuation could be for three months, or it could be until November. She asked the Board to decide on a timeline for a new AGM. After one suggestion to hold a meeting sometime over the next month failed to garner enough support, it was decided the AGM would be held at the conclusion of this new nomination process, once an approved candidate is in place. It was confirmed that a nomination meeting would need to take place on, or before, Aug. 6.

Following the resignation of former Nomination Committee Chair Derek Clark, the Board was tasked with forming a new committee. It was decided that current board members Cathy Campbell, Hilda Pincoe and Andrew Carson would represent the Board on the committee, with Richard Majkot and Wayne Innis serving as alternates. To round out the committee, it was suggested that non-board members Bob Burnside and Angela Panacci fill the final two spots.

Speaking to the Citizen on Monday, Ms. Innis noted she hoped to have confirmation of the new nomination committee by the end of the week. The committee would then meet to elect a new Chair, and decide on a date and location for the new nomination meeting. It is likely to be held, once again, at the Orangeville Agricultural Society Event Centre, on or before Aug. 6.

A major talking point at Monday's meeting concerned the Dufferin-Caledon Conservative Association membership list. With so many issues unearthed in the previous process, members asked Mr. Dillon what was being done to ensure legitimate members would be allowed to vote, and illegitimate members would not. Ms. Innis confirmed the membership list was in the process of being vetted, noting an audit was currently being conducted.

As an aside, Mr. Dillon noted "a process will be put in place to receive feedback to make (this nomination) process better?".

The next bone of contention centred around the costs for a new nomination. Several board members asked if the Party itself would be covering any and all expenses, considering this new process was the will of the executive. Mr. Dillon suggested he would bring this request to the attention of Dustin Van Vugt, Conservative Party of Canada Executive Director.

When asked if head office planned to cover those costs, Mr. Hann indicated there would be no such reprieve for the local association.

"As far as the hosting cost for a new nomination location, as with all nominations, we expect all candidates to bring in a good portion of new members, and through our membership revenue sharing agreement with our EDAs, this will help in covering much of that cost," Mr. Hann stated.

After finishing second during the previous nomination race, Kevin Weatherbee admitted he was "upset" that he was facing the prospect of, essentially, starting over.

"Every other riding in Ontario is practically done. We're the last one left standing. That puts us at a clear disadvantage already," Mr. Weatherbee said. "I'm upset. I think I'm upset like every other member in Dufferin-Caledon. The idea that we have to have a separate vote and go through this process again is ludicrous. The Party has not in any way explained, in a transparent and up-front manner, what went wrong at that meeting in March."

He added, "By initiating a new vote, the Party is disrespecting the will of the voters from that meeting. If there was a problem with the individual, then I am clearly the rightful winner and should be the candidate. I should have been named the candidate as soon as (Mr. Khattra) was disqualified. The members voted, and that was their preference."

When asked if he had ever considered not running in this process, Mr. Weatherbee indicated he was standing up for those members locally who have encouraged and believed in him since he indicated back in 2017 that he wanted to represent the riding in the upcoming federal election.

"I am a Conservative through and through. I'm doing this because I feel it's the right thing to do, and because I feel strongly that members in this riding want a representative that will be accountable to them - who is their member, not a special interest individual, not someone hoisted on them by party operatives, but someone who is an organic candidate, who they know, who they've worked with, who they've campaigned with, who they've fundraised with for over a decade, and who they know they can trust," Mr. Weatherbee stated.

Ms. Shaughnessy admitted she was caught off guard by the announcement of a new nomination last week.

"I had an understanding that there wasn't going to be a new nomination meeting. (I had been led to believe) that a decision was going to be made for us. We were waiting for a decision. We (Ms. Shaughnessy and Mr. Weatherbee's teams) were all giving our case to Ottawa, but we're not in the loop. The Party is the Party, we're simply people trying to become a nominee," Ms. Shaughnessy

said. ?I go with the glow. I have no control here over what the Party does, and how they make decisions. I'm just going to continue on. I think I've shown my true colours as an advocate and voice for the people of Dufferin-Caledon, so I will continue on that path.?

She did express her belief that the current membership list in Dufferin-Caledon should be considered null and void, calling on Party HQ to make sure this new nomination process is conducted properly this time around.

?The last thing anyone wants is another fiasco where you have foreign students voting and people from out of the riding voting. Those members, especially the ones I found that were definitely fraudulent, I wonder whether or not they were removed,? Ms. Shaughnessy added.

Despite receiving just 73 votes during the first nomination, former Orangeville Mayor Jeremy Williams informed the Citizen he plans to re-submit his paperwork for another run during this new process. When asked for his thoughts on how the Party had handled the situation in Dufferin-Caledon, he said he understands why the Party took its time in making a decision.

?It's unfortunate that we have to start all over again, but it's a fresh start. It's a clean slate. That what the members wanted, that's what they've been crying out for. That's what they're getting,? Mr. Williams said. ?At the end of the day, this was the right path forward. It's not the easy path, but it's the right one.?

He added, ?I was surprised it took so long, but it was an important decision. I feel they wanted to make sure of certain things. They wanted to put to rest the whole thing about Harzadan. Once they made sure about that, they made their decision. They could have made it a little bit quicker, but it was an important decision and important decisions take time.?

Having served one term as MP for Brampton West from 2011 to 2015, Mr. Seeback is the only individual thus far to confirm their involvement in the upcoming nomination who has experience at the federal level. While he was busy transitioning into a new career when the previous process was launched back in 2017, which ultimately led to him deciding not to run, Mr. Seeback informed the Citizen things had changed over the past two years, noting he was excited to take part in a more condensed nomination race.

?I'm a lifelong Conservative. I've lived in Dufferin for ten years. Even though I was MP for Brampton West, I still lived in Dufferin County,? Mr. Seeback said. While he may have wanted to serve in his home riding, he stated, ?David Tilson was the guy. I would never challenge an incumbent, it's just not what you do. So, my choice then was to run in Brampton, which is where I grew up.?

Speaking briefly on some of the issues he plans to focus on should he be successful in this nomination, Mr. Seeback noted the community needs to see significant improvements in rural broadband, while also speaking to his track record of securing infrastructure funds for his community while he was MP for Brampton West.

?We have growing communities in this riding. Bolton is growing a lot. Orangeville is growing a lot, and we need a partner at the federal level for infrastructure projects. That's something I have experience with,? Mr. Seeback stated.

While there have been suggestions Mr. Seeback may have known a new nomination was to be called in Dufferin-Caledon prior to the announcement, he informed the Citizen he found out on Thursday evening, while attending outgoing MP David Tilson's retirement party in Mono.

As a former president of the Dufferin-Caledon Conservative Association, with more than 10-years' worth of involvement in the party, Mr. Weatherbee indicated he has never seen the Tories in such a precarious position in the local riding heading into a federal election.

?At this stage in the game, ever since the Party's inception in the early 2000s, I would say we've never been in as bad a situation as we are now in terms of finances and election preparedness, and certainly our morale and unity,? Mr. Weatherbee said. ?The EDA spent a lot of money on the previous nomination vote. That's money out the window. All the time, all the money spent by myself, by Barb Shaughnessy, by Jeremy Williams, it's as if the last process never happened. There's a tremendous amount of waste there.?

He concluded, "Now, by the time we have a candidate, there will be less than two months before the writ drops, and we'll have done absolutely nothing to prepare for the election. Quite frankly, that's completely on the central party."

The federal election will be held on Oct. 21.