

Editorial ? This time, will the best one win?

The rules governing the election of the next Ontario Progressive Conservative leader are the same that led to Patrick Brown's victory in 2015.

Then, as now, Christine Elliott was the front-running candidate, but wound up in second place, after Brown's campaign team managed to sell a lot of \$10 party memberships. Did the best candidate really win?

A lot else has changed in the interim. In 2015, Elliott was an MPP and Brown the Conservative MP for Barrie. Today, Elliott is no longer an MPP, having accepted the position as Ontario's Patient Ombudsman in 2016, while Brown is sitting as an independent despite his election as PC MPP for Simcoe North in a 2015 byelection, having been ejected from the PC caucus a few days ago. Now, all Ontarians who were PC party members as of Friday (Feb. 16) will be able to cast preferential ballots containing the names of five candidates ? Brown, Elliott, Doug Ford, Caroline Mulroney and Tanya Allen ? although we suspect many would prefer to vote only for their favourite or perhaps list only their top three choices.

Perhaps the biggest difference between this election and the previous one is the lack of time candidates had to sign up new members. In 2015 they all had months to do it, while this time Brown had no time at all, having waited until last Friday afternoon to enter the race.

Although the other four candidates had the same couple of weeks to sign up members, only Ford objected to the Feb. 16 deadline, accusing the party of deliberately trying to thwart his leadership bid.

?They're doing this on purpose to hinder me, because out of all the candidates, they know I can sign up more people,? he told the National Post. ?This is about . . . the insiders and the elites trying to figure out how they're going to stop Doug Ford. The common people want me in there.?

As we see it, there's little doubt that the party establishment would like to see the victory go to one of the three female candidates, perhaps seeing Ford as having a mild version of Donald Trump's populist appeal and the same tendency to have a subjective version of the truth when it suits him.

Our suspicion is that any polling of the current PC caucus would disclose a near-unanimous support for Elliott, despite her having taken the job with the Wynne government.

Now 62, the widow of former federal finance minister Jim Flaherty served as MPP for Whitby-Ajax in 2006-07 and Whitby-Oshawa from 2007 to 15 and was a PC leadership candidate in 2009 (losing to Tim Hudak) as well as in 2015.

As of this Tuesday, a seemingly well-sourced Wikipedia article shows Elliott as having been endorsed by 10 MPPs, among them Bill Walker (Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound and Jim Wilson (Simcoe-Grey), as well as by former federal Conservative leadership candidate MP Michael Chong (Wellington-Halton Hills) and two other Conservative MPs.

The same article shows Ford, 53, as having the support of just one MPP, Raymond Cho of Scarborough-Rouge River.

Brown has apparently been endorsed by two MPPs, Toby Barrett (Haldimand-Norfolk) and Ross Romano (Sault Ste. Marie) and three Conservative MPs, Ben Lobb (Huron-Bruce), Phil McColeman (Brantford-Brant) and Alex Nuttall (Barrie-Springwater-Oro-Medonte).

Mulroney, the 43-year-old lawyer and daughter of former prime minister Brian Mulroney, has been endorsed by five MPPs and eight MPs and leads the pack in terms of endorsements from PC candidates ? 19 to 18 for Brown and nine for Elliott.

Allen, 37, is an obvious fringe candidate with no MPP endorsements. A member of the Campaign Life Coalition and Catholic Civil Rights League, she's a social conservative who is an outspoken opponent of the province's sex education curriculum.

So what does this all mean in terms of the candidates' leadership qualities and the party's platform in the June 7 provincial election? Only time will tell.