

Progressive Conservatives work to get after week of turmoil

By Bill Rea

Last week was not an easy time for Ontario's Progressive Conservatives.

In fact, Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones confirmed Saturday she was glad the week was over.

Things got rough for the party last Wednesday night, in the face of reports of allegations of sexual misconduct that had been launched against party Leader Patrick Brown.

That was followed a couple of days later when Party President Rick Dykstra resigned.

Brown, at first, had asserted he would not resign, but changed his mind early the following morning and announced he was leaving his position, and Jones announced she concurred with the decision.

In the interest of the Ontario PC Party, we unanimously agree that Mr. Brown cannot continue serving as the Leader, Jones said in a statement she jointly released with fellow deputy PC Leader Steve Clark last Thursday morning.

It was reported that two women had alleged serious sexual misconduct. One of the alleged incidents took more than 10 years ago, and the other apparently was more recent.

According to media reports, one of the women, who was in her teens and still in high school at the time, said that while Brown was a Barrie city councillor he asked her to perform oral sex on him. The other woman said she served in Brown's constituency office while he was an MP. She said Brown tried to aggressively kiss her without permission while she was drunk.

Brown initially categorically denied the allegations, but issued a statement a couple of hours later announcing he was stepping down.

Mr. Brown is entitled to a legal defence and due process, but he cannot lead us into an election as a result of these allegations, the statement from Jones and Clark added. The Ontario PC Party unequivocally upholds the principle that a safe and respectful society is what we expect and deserve. We need to move forward to eradicate sexual violence and harassment across the province.

We were shocked, Jones told a press conference that she and Clark held early last Thursday afternoon, as she asserted that allegations such as this must be taken seriously.

These women deserve to be heard, she declared.

Jones said Saturday there was a conference call last Wednesday night involving Brown and several members of the Tory Caucus.

I have not spoken to him since, she said.

She also said all the Caucus members involved in the call agreed that Jones and Clark had to go to Queen's Park the following day and face the media.

She thought that media conference did generally go well,

We needed to show that we were united behind the need for Mr. Brown to resign, she said. It wasn't a pleasant situation.

I'm not sure how much more quickly we could have reacted, Jones said, pointing out they held the conference call that had called for the resignation that night.

At the end of the conference call, there was no doubt what had to happen, she added. Mr. Brown had to step down.

Jones also maintained that Brown has been treated fairly in this situation. She said politicians and public figures must be held to a higher standard of behaviour. That has happened, she said.

Nipissing MPP Vic Fedeli was unanimously named interim leader Friday, and the party is planning to go through a process to pick a new leader before the general election, planned for June.

Jones said the new permanent leader will be in place by the end of March.

While Fedeli was eligible to seek the position, he announced Tuesday he will not be running. According to published reports, he is more interested in looking to root out any rot in the party.

Jones is also eligible to seek the leadership, but she asserted Saturday she will not.

I love what I do as a Member representing Dufferin-Caledon, she commented, adding she's worked for two party leaders and has seen the commitments that take away from their time in the community. She said she doesn't want her attention diverted like that.

Jones also said she's confident the party has a chance to recover in time for the coming election. She expects people will take an added interest in what the party is offering as an alternative.

Jones also believes the party has a chance of forming the next government, if we do it right, if we stay united.

If people are willing to move together as a team and present themselves as a team, then we win, she added.

Dufferin-Caledon Progressive Conservative Riding Association President Wayne Innis said he had mixed feeling about this affair, pointing out there were many ways for the party to proceed to pick a new leader.

?They picked a way, and I hope it all works out,? he said Monday.

Innis also expressed the feeling that Caucus acted hastily in forcing Brown out, believing it would have been better to step back and wait a day or two.

?It seems to be the way of the new world,? he added.

?There's no doubt I was clearly shocked to hear these very serious allegations,? commented Bob Gordanier, who will be the Liberal candidate in Dufferin-Caledon in the coming election, adding he was glad to see the PCs took action.

?What is there to say?? observed Dufferin-Caledon Green Party candidate Laura Campbell.

She said it was unfortunate the party didn't do a better job of vetting its leader, although she thought there's still a lot of time to find a new one.