

"Shocked" Progressive Conservatives look to the future



By Brock Weir

Progressive Conservatives are looking to the future with a leadership race set for March 10 after former leader Patrick Brown left the party reeling with his resignation after a series of allegations last week.

Dates for the leadership contest were announced January 31 by the party after The Auroran went to press.

The accusations, which came to light last Wednesday evening followed by Mr. Brown's resignation in the early hours of Thursday, left the party scrambling to lay the groundwork for the future in an election year, while leaving members, and local candidates alike, ?shocked? and dismayed.

?I was very, very shocked,? said Charity McGrath, the PC candidate in Newmarket-Aurora, which includes all of Aurora on the north side of Wellington Street. ?I can honestly say us, as well as my female PC candidates have seen nothing but the utmost professionalism, so we were all very shocked and taken aback; we weren't expecting it at all.?

Describing it as a ?sad situation,? Ms. McGrath said ?women are facing yet another story of harassment,? stories which have become all too familiar in recent months.

?Truthfully, all women across Ontario need to continue to come together and we need to make sure that it is very clear that this kind of behaviour is not okay and it is never tolerated,? she said. ?We need to build a world ? and I think Oprah Winfrey said this ? where no woman has to say 'me too' ever again. As a wife and a mother, I am very supportive of those females that have been put into situations where they are uncomfortable.?

Similar words were offered by Michael Parsa, the Progressive Conservative hopeful for Aurora's south riding, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill.

?It was very difficult to hear and see the images on television and all I can describe it is shocking to see,? said Mr. Parsa of Mr. Brown's hastily called Wednesday night press conference. ?[The campaign] is all secondary. In situations like this, you are thinking of the individual and you're thinking about the people that were involved in this. Those are the things that come to your mind. You're thinking about the people that were involved, you want them to be well and recover.?

Mr. Brown's resignation, he added, was the right decision.

?I think he did the right thing and he now has the opportunity to defend himself,? said Mr. Parsa. ?We have a system in place that allows us to go ahead and have our voices heard and be able to defend ourselves. My message to [the party] is clear: this is one individual. We have over 200,000 members and one person does not represent or reflect the views of the 200,000 plus.

?My intent here is to work very, very hard to listen to the stories of the residents of Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill and take their concerns to Queen's Park and that is not going to change at any point. We're still focused on that. We're very focused to hear their stories, their concerns, and hopefully serve them in a few months.?

At this point, it is anyone's guess as to who will lead the party into this year's Provincial Election, which is widely believed to take place this June.

North Bay MPP Vic Fideli, who was one of a handful of PCs who ran against Mr. Brown in the race to replace then-leader Tim

Hudak, was appointed interim leader of the party on Friday while, later that evening, the Progressive Conservatives decided to carry out a full leadership race, giving their 200,000-plus members a chance to cast their vote.

“Party membership will have the opportunity to select the Leader who will lead the party into the next election,” said Rick Dykstra, who served as PC president until his own resignation at the start of the week. “Our party is already full of 200,000 energized party members. This number will only continue to grow. We look forward to uniting behind the future leader of our party. Together as a team we will defeat Kathleen Wynne and the Liberals in the upcoming election.”

Names of possible leadership candidates bandied about since the vacancy became available at the top include York-Simcoe candidate Caroline Mulroney, former Toronto councillor Doug Ford, former leadership hopeful Christine Elliott and even incumbent Toronto Mayor John Tory, himself a former leader of the PC party.

By the end of the week, Aurora's two candidates were of two different minds when it came to how the next leader should be chosen. Mr. Parsa, for instance, pointed out that it is less than four months away from the election call and that was a factor to consider.

“We need to have a leader that is out there holding the current government to account and this time we're essentially just under four months away from an election call,” said Mr. Parsa. “We need a leader to do that and I think whatever they decide will be done and expedited to have that person in place sooner and hold these guys to account.”

Ms. McGrath, on the other hand, called for an open election right out of the gate.

“I am very adamant that we should have a democratic process to vote in who the next leader would be because we have so many incredible candidates and sitting MPPs at our disposal that it would be the right thing to do,” she said. “I think if we took the next four to eight weeks and had a leadership race, I think that would be the right thing. I'll be honest, I think because we have so many members we can't just impose a few of us within the party. We shouldn't be imposing what the majority maybe wants. I think that is the right thing to do going forward, to have a vote on it.

“There is more than enough time to do that and to do it well. It is a speed bump, but the overall consensus the way I feel and what I have heard from the residents of Newmarket-Aurora is there needs to be more integrity in provincial government. I don't think a small portion of us forcing our view on the majority of us is ever a good idea.”