

PCs shot themselves in the foot; now they're out of feet, says leadership hopeful



By Brock Weir

Say for the sake of argument you were a candidate looking to win a Provincial election for your riding and the powers-that-be said it would be a great idea to campaign on firing 100,000 people, chances are you might say that is a really, really bad idea.

At least, that's what North Bay MPP Vic Fedeli is banking on in his bid to be the next leader of the Progressive Conservative party.

Mr. Fedeli brought his message to Newmarket-Aurora Progressive Conservatives at a meet and greet held at Aw, Shucks! last week. Attended by former MPP Frank Klees, and recently re-elected Newmarket Councillor Jane Twinney, who faced that very real challenge bearing that message to local homes in the spring election, Mr. Fedeli said enough is enough.

'We suffered a terrible loss on June 12,' he said. 'This is the fourth time we have lost in a row and I have to be blunt: I am tired of losing. Jim Wilson, our interim leader, has said it so many times and says it best. We shot ourselves in the foot, quite frankly, and we are out of feet.'

Over the last election, Mr. Fedeli says he would struggle as he went door to door touting what ultimately came to be known as the 'Million Jobs Plan.' Handily winning in 2011, it was an uphill climb this time around 'because of the stupidity.'

There was a sense in his community, he says, of long-time friends and supporters being 'ashamed' to have his party signs on their lawns for any number of reasons, including if their neighbours happened to be, for example, teachers or OPP employees.

'The first thing we need to do is restore pride in the party,' he said. 'We need to reach out to members, tell members you are important, that your opinions matter and we value you.'

Mr. Fedeli is running on a multi-plank platform called 'Ontario First.' A key component of this platform, he said, are constitutional amendments which would transform the party in a number of ways, including bolstering confidence in the party leader. Party leaders should be reviewed at every opportunity to ensure the party as a whole is still behind their vision. Party members should also be empowered to review and ratify party platforms before they are unleashed on the electorate.

'If we came to you in March and said just prior, 'Here is our campaign plan. We think it is going to work if we fire 100,000 people,' how many of you would have ratified that?' he asked. 'There is not one hand here. There is nobody here who would have ratified platforms such as that.'

Describing himself as a "lifelong entrepreneur" who first put that vision into action opening his first business at the age of 16, he charted his rise through the advertising industry, helming a company once named 34th in the Top 50 Companies to Work For In Canada in 1989. There was "hope" in the province at that time, cheap energy to go around, low taxes, and many incentives to go into business. Governments provided a hand by getting out of the way and cutting red tape, he added, something which he argued has not been a recent trend.

Eventually he turned his hand to running non-profits, eventually refocusing on politics where he served as Mayor of North Bay, by selling stagnating land in the Town's portfolio for peanuts to incoming business and industry and reaping the rewards of taxes and employment.

"I am not saying you run the province like a business, because business is for profit, but you can run the province in a business-like way," he say. "You just need to develop a plan."

That plan, he added, does not include Kathleen Wynne's vision, he said, arguing a province cannot be run on a budget that accounts for spending \$12.5 billion more than it is taking in.

Questions from the floor raised from party faithful included how to make better inroads into the 416, revitalizing Ontario's mining industry by allowing further prospecting and industry to "ignite" Ontario's "Ring of Fire" deposits near James Bay, and reversing what was described as the non-profit sector being "terrified" at the prospect of a PC Government.

"[In Ontario First] we should aspire to be first in everything we do: the first in health care, the first in education, the first in entrepreneurship, the first in youth employment," said Mr. Fedeli. "The real message is the tone we deliver. We can be bold without being mean. Right now, what we are is mean to everyone. It is no wonder they think of us as slash and burn, but over the next four years the \$12.5 billion deficit by Kathleen Wynne?she is going to take our province and she is going to be the one who is feared."