

National Council upholds removal of Khattrra as Tory candidate in D-C

Written By **MIKE BAKER**

Harzadan Singh Khattrra has been removed as Conservative Party of Canada candidate in Dufferin-Caledon riding.

The decision, made by the National Candidate Selection Committee (NCSC) and upheld by the party's National Council, was made public last Thursday (April 25).

In a note addressed to Dufferin-Caledon Conservative Association President Jennifer Innis and local nomination chair Derek Clark, Conservative Party Executive Director Dustin Van Vugt confirmed Mr. Khattrra's disqualification and asked the local board for patience while party officials consider the next steps.

"It's not a decision the Conservative Party takes lightly, and I understand the questions of what happens next are going to be top of mind for you. I will say that we are going to take a few days to decide what the best next steps are," Mr. Van Vugt wrote. "Once a decision is made around the next step for Dufferin-Caledon and the Conservative Party candidacy in the riding, I will be sure to communicate that with you."

The decision comes more than three weeks after Barb Shaughnessy, one of the four candidates in the local nomination race, submitted an appeal questioning the validity of the Dufferin-Caledon voters' list. Speaking to the Citizen in early April, Ms. Shaughnessy said she had signed affidavits that she says proved ineligible members had been allowed to vote during the nomination. She alleged that both international students and out-of-riding residents helped swing the vote in Mr. Khattrra's favour.

In an email release sent to party members this week, Ms. Shaughnessy reiterated why she felt it was important to appeal the initial result.

"Many members felt that their riding had been high-jacked," she wrote. "I appealed the case because it was the right thing to do."

With the nomination process tainted and no candidate in place, Mr. Clark informed the Free Press that Conservative HQ in Ottawa really had three choices on how to best move forward: to organize another nomination, award the candidacy to Kevin Weatherbee, the runner-up at the original meeting, or to appoint someone not involved in the original process.

When asked what he considered to be the best course of action, Mr. Clark indicated the decision will fall squarely on the shoulders of party executives in Ottawa and that he would rather not speculate. He did, however, state that he "wouldn't recommend" starting the nomination process over again.

"My personal recommendation would be not to have that. Given the nature of what just happened, and given the timing, starting the nomination over, you'd be getting into another 60 to 90 day process. I don't think (the party) would want to have a nomination meeting, potentially, in July," Mr. Clark said. "That would be getting way too close to the election date. But, at the end of the day, it isn't my call. They (the party executive) will determine how they want to best proceed."

Ms. Innis, who has had to defend herself against allegations she was attempting to place herself as a potential appointee as candidacy rumours she has categorically denied, told the Free Press she feels the best option would be to award the candidacy to Mr. Weatherbee.

"Never in my experience, in the time I have spent with the Conservative Party, have I seen them appoint someone who wasn't part of the nomination process. I've never seen that. I've only seen them appoint the second placed finisher," Ms. Innis said. "I'm confident, because of the conversations I've had (with the party executive), that they will give it to the second-place finisher, or there will be a new nomination. They've been clear to me that there's only two options."

In her release to media, Ms. Shaughnessy asserted that, with Mr. Khattra out of the equation, she would have the support of the majority of party members.

?Many believe the second-place finisher, Kevin Weatherbee, should be appointed. First ballot votes were Weatherbee 468, Shaughnessy 409? a 59-point difference. Under the ranked ballot system, Harzadan Khattra's first votes would be discarded and second votes (to our knowledge 200+ votes) distributed,? Ms. Shaughnessy wrote.

She added, ?We claim our support would end up being greater than Kevin's. Our contention is that ?illegal' members would not have made the effort to check off second and third on the ballots.?

Since members are not required to identify themselves on their ballot card, there would be no sure fire way to distinguish legitimate and illegitimate votes in favour of Mr. Khattra, as such one would assume all of the 796 votes the disqualified candidate received in the first round of voting would have to be null and void, and removed from the process.

Ms. Innis noted that, while a decision has not yet been passed down by party executive, she is pushing daily for an answer.

?I have been consistently asking when a decision will be made. Unfortunately, the party hasn't met any of their deadlines with me. I keep asking. I send messages every day,? she said. ?I know they're swamped right now, because they're doing this across the nation. We're not the only riding. But, I'm very hopeful we will have a decision soon. It's been frustrating for party members and it's been frustrating for the board.?

She added, ?We're just asking for a candidate now because we want to get going, we want to start raising money and getting our candidate out into the community and get our campaign started.?

In an email distributed to board members on Tuesday evening (April 30), Ms. Innis proposed that the local association hold an emergency meeting next Wednesday (May 8) with the purpose of sending a motion to National Council, requesting they expedite the matter and make a final decision.

Multiple attempts to reach Mr. Khattra for comment were unsuccessful.

After coming in for some criticism from parts of the community over the past few months, Mr. Clark wanted to go on the record to lay out what, exactly, the local committee was responsible for during the nomination process.

?There were a lot of things that people assumed, or didn't know. The committee's job was to help with the vetting of candidates. We didn't do anything with social media, or background checks. The Party does that,? Mr. Clark said. ?We never had access to the membership list, the Party is responsible for that. What we do is help during the interview process, plan for the nomination meeting, and we're required to make sure the event is safe and secure and run in a structured, orderly process. We did that.?

He added, ?It's important to state that, because some people feel the local committee failed. We did not fail. We executed and delivered (what we were supposed to). Keep in mind, there was another candidate that was disallowed. (Sarbjit) Sra was disallowed, people forget that. We did our part as part of the due diligence.?

Also wanting to set the record straight is Ms. Innis. While rumours of her apparent interest in succeeding retiring MP David Tilson as Conservative candidate have long lingered, Ms. Innis took exception to a remark by Ms. Shaughnessy in an emailed release to members, seemingly outing the current Caledon Regional Councillor for making a play for the position.

?There are rumours abounding that National Council will appoint a person who did not run as a candidate. I have been told by multiple sources the Riding President Jennifer Innis is lobbying hard to be the candidate,? Ms. Shaughnessy wrote.

?There is absolutely no truth to that. That statement is categorically false,? Ms. Innis told the Citizen on being asked if she was, indeed, taking steps to position herself for a potential appointment.

?When I ran municipally last year, I said that I would not be seeking the federal nomination, and the question has been posed to me since, even if I was offered the candidacy, I would not take it,? Ms. Innis said. ?I would not abandon my residents like that. I made a commitment and my word is very important to me. There are some serious issues happening right now with the Town of Caledon and the Region of Peel, as well as in my role as chair of the Toronto Region Conservation Authority that could have significant impacts on our residents and our community.?

She concluded, ?I would never jump ship half way through. That's not what a leader does, and I'm pretty true to keeping my word.?