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Shaughnessy files second appeal against Dufferin-Caledon Conservative nomination

Written By **MIKE BAKER**

The story surrounding the Dufferin-Caledon Conservative nomination took another turn this week after one-time candidate Barb Shaughnessy confirmed that she has submitted a second appeal to the party's National Council.

A little over two weeks on from the vote that saw Orangeville businessman Harzadan Singh Khattra secure the Conservative nomination in the riding in comfortable fashion, rumours persist claiming the process was, in some way, tainted.

Speaking to the Free Press on Tuesday, Ms. Shaughnessy confirmed that she had submitted an initial appeal to the Conservative Party on March 21, within the five-day window in which a candidate could issue a grievance. She stressed the appeal does not, specifically, contest the vote tally, but rather calls into question the eligibility of some of those who may, or may not, have voted.

?Everybody has heard about the irregularities that went on that night. I felt an appeal was necessary,? she said. ?I believe rules were broken with regards to obtaining memberships. You must be a citizen or a permanent resident living in the riding to become a member to vote. International students are not allowed.?

She added, ?When somebody signs up (to become a member of the Conservative party), they have to declare that they were either a permanent resident, or a citizen. What this comes down to, is we have had people (confirming), saying they are a permanent resident or a citizen and I'm hearing that is not the case. That is not a fact.?

When asked if she could disclose how many alleged ineligible voters had, in fact, been allowed to vote, Ms. Shaughnessy said ?rumours are rumours? and that she could not confirm any details.

?I'm not going to get into the numbers I've heard. The bottom line is, there are rumours there were a lot of foreign students voting that day. Again, that is a rumour. What I can verify is that international students were signed up. I don't have the voting list that was used (on nomination night), so I can't tell you whether or not they voted, but I can say they were signed up as party members,? Barb added.

A final decision regarding Ms. Shaughnessy's latest appeal was considered yesterday (April 3). She told the Free Press she expects to learn if that appeal was successful at some point today (April 4).

In her package to the Conservative National Council, Ms. Shaughnessy provided sworn affidavits on membership purchases, a request to investigate a specific group of international students, various residential irregularities, various membership irregularities and various nomination meeting irregularities.

She also called into question Mr. Khattra's use of the abbreviations M.D. beside his name, a reference to his training at Atlantic University's School of Medicine from 2010 to 2015. The school, located in St. Lucia, was closed in 2017 and was not accredited by the Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Education in Medicine and other Health Professions (CAAM-HP). In early 2018, the Canadian government announced graduates from the program would not be eligible to apply for Medical Council of Canada (MCC) services, or for licensure in Canada.

?It is wrong to break the rules,? Ms. Shaughnessy asserted in an email release to party members.

The issue was debated on Tuesday amongst members of the Dufferin-Caledon Conservative party board, who gathering for the first time since the nomination meeting. Ms. Shaughnessy was present at the meeting, as was Mr. Khattra.

There, board member Jackie Demcszur called for a third-party review of the Dufferin-Caledon membership list.

?I want to see a complete audit of the membership list. We, as a board, have a responsibility to ensure the integrity of the democratic process here in Dufferin-Caledon,? Ms. Demcszur said. ?(The rumours) hurt us here on the board, and they hurt the party. I think we need to put this to bed and get to the bottom of the issues once and for all.?

Dufferin-Caledon Conservative President Jennifer Innis informed the board that she had been asked by the party's central office in Ottawa not to make any decisions or comments in regards to the nomination until a final decision had been made on Ms. Shaughnessy's appeal. She did, however, state that she too had heard concerns about the process from local residents, but went on record to state that criticism of the Dufferin-Caledon board, or nomination committee was unfair.

?What I have done is direct anyone that has concerns to David Dillon (a member of the Conservative party executive). It has been made very clear to me the nomination process, the rules, guidelines and nomination itself is all under central party ruling. It is their responsibility,? Ms. Innis said. ?Before this board does anything, I'm asking that we allow central party to make their ruling first. They have the ultimate say. It is their responsibility. It is not the responsibility of this board.?

Referencing some of the complaints she, personally, had heard from local party members, Ms. Demcszur reiterated there were numerous issues she feels the board needed to iron out.

?I have heard personally about members who have been reimbursed their membership fees against their wishes. Some people were put on the (voting) list (when they) didn't sign up in the first place. There are a number of integrity issues with the list,? Ms. Demcszur said.

Board member Wayne Noble told the board his own son was denied the right to vote during the nomination, even after providing proof that he had paid for a membership prior to the Feb. 14 cut-off point. According to party rules, anyone who purchased a new membership after Feb. 14 would not be allowed to vote during the nomination meeting.

While he wouldn't touch on specific details, Derek Clark, the chair of the Dufferin-Caledon Candidate Nomination Committee, expressed his belief that the volunteers in charge of the nomination meeting ?did the best (they) could?.

?There's a lot of emotion. The committee will not confirm the results that have been posted unofficially. I will not discuss the content of the appeal, but I am satisfied (with the) procedures we used on the night of the nomination. The party did the best they could up until nomination night to vet the membership list.?

After hearing numerous complaints from local party members, which he asserted stemmed from ?fake news published in the press?, Mr. Clark confirmed he had made several recommendations to the Conservative party's central office regarding how they could, potentially, improve the nomination process in the future. Chief amongst those recommendations was to provide voters with a ?playbook?, designed to educate and inform them about voting using a ranked ballot system.

The motion put forward by Ms. Demcszur to commission a third-party audit of the local membership list failed. Offering something of an alternative, Ms. Innis, who was preparing to mail notices to the party's 3,800 local members, stated if she were to receive ?a significant amount? of those notices back as return to sender, she would call an emergency board meeting where members could reconsider their decision.

?I think there needs to be a collective response to deal with the concerns over the membership list,? Ms. Demcszur said shortly before the vote. ?We have to account to our membership. We are the face of our riding. There needs to be some confidence in the membership list and we can obtain that confidence through a third-party audit. We need to clear the air.?

While the ordeal has led some local members to question their loyalty to the Conservative Party, Ms. Shaughnessy noted her beliefs remain as strong as ever. Referencing the term identity politics, which has been used regularly in the riding over the past two weeks,

Ms. Shaughnessy noted this was an issue that could happen ?to any party, anywhere?.

?This is not a Conservative Party problem. The problem here is the process, not the south Asian community, or any other sort of group,? Ms. Shaughnessy said. ?This could have happened in the Liberal Party, NDP Party, it could happen provincially and it could happen federally. What I know and understand is this is an any-party issue. Unless we start changing the processes for more transparency there's a risk (this sort of thing could happen again).?

A final decision from the Conservative National Council was not available at press time. For more information on the Dufferin-Caledon Conservative Party, visit www.dufferincaledon.ca. To report a problem with the March 19 nomination meeting, contact Derek Clark at derek.clark@rogers.com.