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Turmoil in Tory-land

EDITORIAL

What a mess the Conservative Party has created for itself here in Dufferin-Caledon.

It has now been five weeks since Harzadan Singh Khattra seemingly secured the local nomination on a controversial night at the Orangeville Agricultural Society Event Centre. Yet, questions remain over whether or not he will be approved as an official candidate, with the National Council currently investigating an appeal against last month's result. The reality is, the Dufferin-Caledon Conservative Association may enter the month of May without an approved candidate.

That, in itself, isn't necessarily a huge issue. After all, neither the Liberals, Greens, NDPs, or any other interested party have put forth an official candidate yet. The problem here is the way the Conservatives have allowed such a situation to play out in the public eye with little, or in some cases, absolutely no comment.

The allegations levelled against Mr. Khattra and his team have cast a cloud over his win. On nomination night, he proudly claimed that a new record had been set in Conservative membership sales this year. It has since been alleged that a significant number of those new members were improperly signed up ? with one-time candidate Barb Shaughnessy claiming international students and out-of-riding residents were registered to help Mr. Khattra secure the local vote.

Those claims are currently being investigated by the Conservative Party's National Council. If true, questions would almost certainly have to be asked about the process used to vet membership lists ahead of future votes.

The lack of transparency, both at the local and federal level, has been a particular cause for concern over the past few weeks. Local nomination chair Derek Clark has taken something replicating a vow of silence, claiming on multiple occasions a non-disclosure agreement prevents him from discussing any and all details relating to the nomination. While Dufferin-Caledon Conservative Association President Jennifer Innis has been happy to talk to media, she had little involvement in the finer details of the nomination process and, as such, has been unable to offer much substance when asked for her thoughts.

To his credit, Mr. Khattra has responded to requests for comment from at least two local media sources, but the fact he has had very little presence in the community since nomination night is puzzling. As the only candidate in place in Dufferin-Caledon, one would think Mr. Khattra would take the opportunity to get a head start on his potential opponents ahead of October's election.

He should be everywhere right now, listening to residents, discussing his ideas and educating people about the Conservatives' platform. Instead, he has remained in the background, seemingly waiting for a decision to come down from the National Council before entering campaign mode.

So, what can the Conservatives do from here? Regardless of the National Council's decision, the party needs to get out in front of this developing story. Further investigation will be required. A significant portion of the Conservative voter-base in Dufferin-Caledon have been left in the dark for weeks as the Party has scrambled to investigate what exactly happened during this most recent nomination process.

First and foremost, the Party needs to be up front with its members. The issues that have plagued this process need to be addressed, and quickly. This will mark the first time in 15 years the local association will head into an election without the experienced David Tilson at the helm. There is a sense of uncertainty. In the 2015 vote, Liberal candidate Ed Crewson pushed Mr. Tilson relatively close, securing 23,643 votes to Mr. Tilson's 27,977.

If the Conservatives aren't careful, they could be faced with the prospect of losing the Dufferin-Caledon riding for the first time in the new millennium. What has long been considered one of the Tories' safest seats might not be so safe anymore.