
BRIEFING



Ontario's Progressive Conservatives are about a week shy of their big policy coming-out party - and the man in charge of the affair says he sees the Conservatives who would like to spoil it as no real threat to PC Leader **Patrick Brown**.

Kevin Gaudet is co-chair and policy lead for the PC policy and election readiness convention, taking place at the Toronto Congress Centre on Nov. 25. He's overseen the PCs' unique policy process, in which the party solicited ideas from party members across the province through a website and local riding associations, filtered them through small policy advisory committees - or PACs - and whittled them down to 139 resolutions that were then voted on by the membership in an online ballot.

Through that whittling process, all member-suggested resolutions that broke with the party line - any expressing socially conservative views or opposing Brown's plans for a revenue-neutral carbon tax - were shaved away, leaving a mix of non-controversial policy proposals and vague motherhood statements.

Every single one of those resolutions were approved by the membership in the online vote this fall.

Gaudet says they'll form the basis of the party's platform and now give licence for the leader - who's been criticized by political opponents for being light on policy proposals thus far - to announce more policy specifics, in the half-year before election day.

"We saw the first shoe to drop of many shoes to drop (Tuesday), with Patrick's announcement of the delay of the minimum wage hike," Gaudet said. "The leader now has greater room and opportunity to increase the level of detail he discloses on policy, and I'll think you'll see that going forward."

Later this week, the PCs also firmed up their official stance on legal recreational weed: They support the government's plan to keep public control of the sale of recreational marijuana through stores operated by the LCBO, while expressing concern that the government hasn't devoted enough funding to ensure public safety.

Neither of those policy planks are contained in the list of resolutions that was voted on and approved by the membership.

On Nov. 25, the party will celebrate the results of that vote, hold campaign training events for candidates and their staff, and there will be a "very important policy speech" by Brown, Gaudet said.

"It should be a fun opportunity for conservatives to get together seven hydro bills before the next election and a chance to rally the troops, so to speak, ahead of efforts to replace the untrustworthy Wynne government," he said.

Meanwhile, groups of social conservatives and others are trying to force Brown and the PC executive to allow the party to vote on their issues, or remove him and his executive.

Jack Fonseca, spokesman for the socially conservative group Campaign Life Coalition, says the group is actively trying to wrest control of the PC Party from Brown, after what he called a "fake" policy process.

"He **admitted to the media** that he scuttled member-driven resolutions that were socially conservative, and we know for a fact that dozens, probably hundreds of grassroots members, submitted socially conservative policy resolutions in ridings across the province," Fonseca said.

"So this is all fake," he said.

Fonseca said the party's unwillingness to entertain socially conservative policy - such as repealing the sex-ed curriculum, an Ontario "bathroom bill" that would force transgender people to use a bathroom opposite from their gender identities - led many people to tell his organization that they voted against every policy resolution in protest.

"I don't even believe the claim that every one of these 139 fake resolutions passed," he said. "I'll bet many were shot down because people protested."

Gaudet dismissed Fonseca's claims as "whining and crying" about the outcome of the vote, saying that there were hundreds of resolutions submitted by the public that didn't ultimately end up surviving the policy committee process to be voted on.

"I guess any individual or organization could complain that they didn't get their way. I guess this just falls under that long list of possible complainers," said Gaudet.

He said the vote was conducted by an independent company and overseen by PricewaterhouseCoopers - the critics, however, noted the party hasn't released any original documents from the company that ran the vote.

"I have heard these ridiculous accusations myself, they haven't been made to me directly," Gaudet said. "Clearly it's sour grapes from some individuals, some organizations, that weren't capable of rallying, or doing meaningful and proper advocacy. It's really a comment on his failure to organize, clearly."

Fonseca said Campaign Life Coalition is now working on a number of strategies of "wresting control" of the party from Brown, and returning it to the grassroots. That includes reaching out to members, but also encouraging members and socially conservative Tories to support the project "Take Back Your PC Party," led by **Jim Karahalios**.

Karahalios is organizing a drive to use the PC constitution to trigger a general membership meeting, where the party's members could take action to change the party's constitution, hold direct votes on policy resolutions and, if they were inclined, remove members of the executive or even Brown himself.

"It's a great strategy," said Fonseca. "Get the membership to use the constitution to wrest control of the party back from Brown, and force rules and procedures to be followed, according to the constitution."

However, Karahalios said he is motivated by opposition to Brown's support of a carbon tax. He objects to Brown's handling of a number of disputed nominations and the overall policy process, and argues Brown has violated his party's constitution on these issues.

The goal of Take Back Your PC Party is not to remove Brown as leader or fire the executive - and Karahalios said he believes that would be unnecessary. Rather, he seeks to address his concerns with the policy and nomination processes, via the party's constitution.

He's been sending out mailers and robocalls and says he believes he's nearing the level of support from members required, under the party's constitution, to force the general membership meeting.

"We're not quite there, we need more members to respond, but we're getting close," he said.

For his part, Gaudet said he doesn't believe they'll be capable of forcing a change at the top.

"I think Patrick Brown enjoys the support of the party, malcontents notwithstanding," Gaudet said. "Anybody's welcome to follow the process to the best of their ability, and I can't imagine them being successful."

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