

Sylvia Jones won't run, will remain neutral in PC leadership contest



By Mike Pickford

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones has confirmed she will not be putting her name forward as a potential replacement for former Ontario PC leader Patrick Brown, noting she will also remain neutral throughout the party's leadership process, which will end on March 10.

It has been a whirlwind start to the new year for the Progressive Conservatives, who found themselves leaderless in the wake of Mr. Brown's resignation on Jan. 25 following claims of sexual misconduct against two women. The PC caucus quickly selected Nippissing MPP Vic Fedeli as Interim Leader, while Ms. Jones and MPP for Leeds-Grenville Steve Clark will remain as deputy leaders at least for the time being.

Jag Badwal, interim president of the provincial PCs, announced a new permanent leader would be selected on March 10. As of press time, former Toronto councillor Doug Ford, Caroline Mulroney – daughter of former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney – and former MPP Christine Elliott, who finished second to Mr. Brown in the 2015 leadership race, have signalled their intent to run.

Speaking to the Citizen on Wednesday (Feb. 7), Ms. Jones expressed her belief that it will remain a three-person race heading into the membership vote. Party members will have the opportunity to vote for the person they would like to see as their next leader from March 2 to 8. When asked if she had considered running for the position, Ms. Jones was firm in her answer, stating she had "other priorities" as a provincial politician.

"I have worked for two leaders of the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party and I know just how much time they have to spend outside of their communities. I am not prepared to do that," Ms. Jones said. "I truly love what I do right here in Dufferin-Caledon and I'm really excited to continue on in this role if the people elect me to do so in June."

It may be easy to forget with all the hubbub surrounding the Ontario PCs right now, but a provincial election is now less than six months away, scheduled to be held on June 7. While she, along with Mr. Fedeli and Mr. Clark, has been asked to remain neutral throughout the leadership race, Ms. Jones did offer up some comments on the three candidates.

"Christine Elliott has most recently been serving as the Ontario Patient Ombudsman and she did finish second in the previous leadership race, she has announced she will be back in once again this time," Ms. Jones said. "The first individual to declare his candidacy was Doug Ford. He is the only one I don't know and have not yet met. The third candidate is Caroline Mulroney. Because of my role on the Ontario campaign team, I have been training some potential candidates for the last year and a bit and I have met with Caroline several times and know her a little bit."

She added, "At this point I think those are going to be the only three candidates that we see come forward, just because it is such a close and fast race."

Ms. Jones noted she would be more than willing to meet with Mr. Ford should he wish to do so, although she recognized he will likely focus on individuals more open to lending him their support.

"At this point all of the candidates know I will remain neutral throughout this entire process," Ms. Jones added.

While it has been two weeks now since she was sent to face the Toronto media, alongside Mr. Clark, Ms. Jones says it isn't something she looks back on with disappointment or regret, or even something she considered as particularly daunting or challenging, reiterating she simply did the job she was asked to do.

?I don't think this period has been as challenging as some of the issues I've been fighting for in Dufferin-Caledon over the years. When your caucus colleagues ask you and the other deputy leader to go and talk to the Toronto media and answer all the questions not being answered by anyone else, yes, it was a short night in terms of sleep, but we do what we have to do,? Ms. Jones said. Referencing Mr. Brown and what she described as the ?shocking? revelations coming out about his private life, Ms. Jones noted the party had no other choice but to accept his resignation, feeling the PCs ?dealt with the situation appropriately?. With three very different candidates putting their name forward for party leadership, Ms. Jones hopes to see interest in the race increase as we get closer to the vote.

?What has been interesting is how many people locally have rejoined or expressed their excitement in participating in this leadership vote. I think there has been a bit of a resurgence in wanting to participate in the process,? Ms. Jones said. ?Locally, I have been getting a lot of people reaching out and asking about the process and how it's going to work. There has definitely been an increased interest in Dufferin-Caledon.?

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