

PATRICK BROWN LOOKS TO EX-BOSS STEPHEN HARPER AS PARAGON OF SO-CON CONTROL



21.12.2016 [Sabrina Nanji](#)

Patrick Brown is taking a page from the playbook of his former boss, ex-Conservative prime minister **Stephen Harper**, to keep the social conservative faction of the Progressive Conservative Party in check.

This fall sitting, the PC Leader has been attempting to tame social conservative flare-ups as he recalibrates the party, and arguably his own image, toward the centre in the run-up to the 2018 general election.

Brown said in an interview Wednesday that Harper had a special knack for keeping "divisive social issues" at bay.

"[Harper] would use his influence as prime minister to try and discourage divisive social issues and I think, for the most part, he was able to avoid those debates and focus on Canada's financial health. I think that was a prudent approach."

Brown sat on the backbench in Harper's Conservative government when he was the MP for Barrie before stepping down to run for the provincial Tory leadership last year. In 2006,

Harper held a free vote on same-sex marriage and Brown was among the Conservative MPs that voted to reopen legislation that allowed LGBT couples to get married. The motion was easily defeated. (Brown told *The Globe and Mail* and *QP Briefing* earlier this year he was following a platform commitment, but it was a free vote.)

Should the Ontario Tories form government 18 months hence — a fairly plausible scenario based on polls of late that place Brown as the front-runner — he said his party will focus on legislation that has to do with the "economic health of the province," à la Harper. When pressed on whether a Premier Brown would steer the vote on matters of conscience, he said he's not interested in "revisiting old social battles."

"If you're asking me if I would have individual members that would attempt to bring up divisive social issues, I would oppose it as premier ... I've made it clear to caucus that that's not part of our platform, that's not part of our agenda, and to stay away from it," he said.

Most recently, Brown had to relay such reminders to backbencher MPP **Rick Nicholls**, who [reportedly went rogue](#) when he seemed to suggest to a religious interest group that the PCs had a hidden so-con agenda.

Brown also cracked the whip on Bill 28, the [equal parentage legislation that passed unanimously](#); eleven of his 28 caucus members, including Nicholls, were not there to vote on a bill that has been particularly contentious in so-con circles. The Liberals and some interest groups charged Brown with muzzling his MPPs, but Brown deflected, and pointed out that members across the aisles weren't in the house either, including Liberal Premier **Kathleen Wynne** and New Democratic Party Leader **Andrea Horwath**. That said, Nicholls told the religious groups he would have voted against the legislation, but decided not to because it would have been "problematic" for his party. Nicholls later retracted and apologized for the comments at Brown's command.

Asked about the PC's social conservative base, Brown did not stray from his usual script. He said so-cons are welcome in his party, along with pretty much everyone else.

"For me, it doesn't matter what your faith is, what your skin colour is, who you love — that's none of the government's business, that's none of our party's business ... But if you want to be part of our team, we're talking about hydro prices, we're talking about red tape, we're talking about the skills mismatch. I'm not interested in people waging campaigns to revisit social issues that have been long settled."

In the wake of PC MPP **Sam Oosterhoff's** election in Niagara-West Glanbrook, Brown said he had tightened up the vetting process for nominations and some so-called social conservatives haven't made the cut. (Neither have [documentarians of alleged hamster-eaters](#) and ["Muslim trash" name-callers](#).)

Brown also repeated his lines that his party won't be the mechanism to push "divisive social issues" — but division is what the Tory leader has spawned this fall sitting.

Brown's messy divorce from the social conservatives after actively courting them during the 2015 Tory leadership race has prompted vitriol from both ends of the political spectrum.

On the right, **Brian Lilley**, editor of the media hub *The Rebel*, is actively campaigning for Brown to "[pick a side](#)," lest he lose support from traditional conservatives.

"It's fine to have a big tent, but the tent still has to be blue," Lilley writes, inviting readers to send a "polite email" to Brown's office. It reads, in part, that "in order to win, you [Brown] need to be a real conservative, not a Liberal in a blue suit. Please, pick a side, and let me know where you stand. My support depends on it."

Brown said he disagrees with the premise of Lilley's campaign and that "there's nothing wrong with being a progressive conservative," emphasis on the progressive. "I'm proud to be focused on fiscal issues, on economic issues, and that's where the vast, vast majority of my membership, and, frankly, I think the vast majority of the province, wants us to focus."

As for those outside that "vast vast majority," such as prominent so-con and anti-sex-ed crusader **Queenie Yu**, Brown may have burned a bridge. In September, Yu sparked the sex-ed letter snafu in which a letter bearing Brown's signature promising to "scrap" the updated curriculum went out to voters in the Scarborough-Rouge River byelection, which Brown later called a mistake. Yu recently told *QP Briefing* that the PCs are losing so-con support with Brown at the helm.

Brown appears unfazed.

Asked if he would be leading the Tories in the 2018 election, Brown laughed and said he "will be doing so enthusiastically."

He added that he has grown the Tory membership from 10,000 to nearly 100,000, and is leading the other two parties when it comes to political fundraising, tighter rules for which come into effect in January.

"I can tell you the new membership growth is with people who share my modern, inclusive Progressive Conservative values," he said.

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