

Ontario Tory leader felled by unsubstantiated sexual misconduct allegations

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The leader of Ontario's Progressive Conservatives, Patrick Brown, was forced to resign shortly after midnight Wednesday, less than four hours after unproven, anonymous accusations of sexual assault were levelled against him—accusations he has vehemently denied.

Brown is the first high-profile political scalp in Canada of the #MeToo witch hunt over sexual misconduct.

Brown, who according to opinion polls was poised to become the Premier of Ontario after June's provincial election, was the target of a *CTV News* report alleging that he had behaved in a sexually inappropriate manner with two young women. Brown allegedly plied the teenage women with alcohol and then groped or asked them to perform sexual acts on him.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has no political sympathy for Brown, a right-wing, anti-working class Tory politician. But the felling of politicians, like the firing and public pillorying of people active in the arts and entertainment world, on the basis of unproven, often anonymous allegations of sexual misconduct sets a chilling precedent. Due process, the presumption of innocence and other democratic legal principles are being eviscerated.

The speed with which Wednesday's evening events occurred was breathtaking. The first the public had any notion there were accusations against Brown was when he convened a press conference shortly before 10 PM to announce that CTV was about to air its report. At the press conference, which lasted less than two minutes, Brown said, "A couple of hours ago I learned about troubling allegations about my conduct and my character. These allegations are false, categorically untrue—every one of them. I will defend myself as hard as I can with all means at my disposal."

Brown vowed to stay on as Progressive Conservative leader. But by then, steps to oust him were already well underway. His top aides had already resigned. Soon after,

the Conservative parliamentary caucus, meeting in an emergency conference call, would give him a unanimously-backed ultimatum: either resign or be publicly repudiated. Brown's resignation was announced shortly before 1 AM.

In the first alleged incident, which is said to have happened a decade ago, a woman, who was a high school student at the time, said that she met Brown, a teetotaler, in a bar with a mutual friend. After they returned to Brown's house, the woman said Brown offered her drinks and then gave her a tour of his home. She added that by this point in the evening she was drunk, while Brown had not consumed any alcohol. The woman alleged that when they entered the bedroom, Brown closed the door and asked her to perform oral sex.

In the second alleged incident, Brown is said to have kissed, then groped a woman who worked in his parliamentary office, while they were sitting on a bed at Brown's house during an after-party. She added that Brown laid her down on the bed and continued kissing her. She then asked him to stop, saying she had a boyfriend. Brown complied and drove her home.

Neither when these events reportedly occurred, or now, when they have become the subject of a media furor, has any complaint been filed with police, let alone the allegations tested in a legal forum.

This has not stopped the unseemly spectacle of politicians piling on Brown from all sides with sanctimonious condemnations of his alleged behavior and admonitions for the public to "believe" his accusers and all self-avowed victims of sexual misconduct.

The conditions for this have been created by the corporate media's promotion of the #MeToo witch hunt as a blow for women's rights and its endorsement by the highest levels of the federal Liberal government. The latter views #MeToo as a means of mobilizing sections of the petty bourgeoisie behind its right-wing program of

militarism abroad and attacks on democratic and social rights at home. (see: Why is Canada's Liberal government endorsing the #MeToo witch-hunt?)

Brushing aside any suggestion that the allegations ought first to be investigated, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau intoned, "It's extremely important that we make absolutely clear that sexual harassment and sexual assault is unacceptable.

"My thoughts turn immediately to the women who came forward knowing how difficult it can be, to salute them for their courage, and their leadership."

Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne described the allegations against Brown as "shocking," but refused to be drawn on whether they would impact the upcoming election. Yesterday afternoon, the Progressive Conservatives announced that they will hold a full-blown leadership contest to replace Brown, spurning suggestions that the parliamentary caucus select Brown's replacement given the imminence of the June 7 election.

Ontario New Democratic Party leader Andrea Horwath was if anything even more dismissive about any concern that the media-supported #MeToo campaign is running roughshod over democratic rights.

Asked by a reporter whether Brown should have a right to due process, Horwath replied by saying she had a two word response, "Jian Ghomeshi." A high-profile CBC Radio host until he was fired in 2014, Ghomeshi was acquitted on multiple sexual assault charges after a widely publicized trial.

Horwath went on to effectively justify the #MeToo campaign's insistence victims be believed on their say-so and punitive action taken without the accused in many cases even being informed of the charges, let alone given the opportunity to answer them. "The justice system is failing women," declared Horwath. "It really is." She went on to decry the system's failure to "protect" women and ensure "that women see justice," suggesting, like a rightwing law-and-order advocate or proponent of vigilantism, that this should be corrected by denying the accused their basic rights.

Given the current media furor over #MeToo it is doubtful Brown could have long survived as Conservative leader. Nonetheless, the speed with which his colleagues threw him to the wolves is bound up with his narrow base of support within the party.

In 2015, when a federal Conservative MP, he won the Ontario Tory leadership by rallying social conservatives and ethnic community leaders who hitherto had had little influence in or, in some cases, even involvement with the

party.

Then, to the consternation of much of the party leadership and activist base, he shifted the Progressive Conservatives, who have not won an election since 1998, closer to the "centre." Eschewing his previous reputation as a Stephen Harper acolyte, he strove to give the impression that a Brown-led PC government would not make major policy changes. This was a far cry from the hard-right campaign the Tories had mounted in 2014 under Tim Hudak, which included pledges to slash 100,000 public sector jobs and introduce anti-worker US-style "right to work" legislation.

The concern over the party's direction was exacerbated by Brown's refusal to come out forcefully against the Liberal's \$2.40 minimum wage hike. Right-wing business owners have pushed back ferociously against the hike, clawing back tips and abolishing paid breaks to recoup their losses.

The press meanwhile raised question about Brown's judgment after he made transparently false corruption allegations against Wynne.

Nothing progressive can come out of the removal of Brown. It advances the struggle to develop an independent political movement of the working class against austerity and war not one iota. On the contrary, the anti-democratic and right-wing character of the #MeToo witch hunt, together with the media hysteria being whipped up around Brown, will be used to push the political climate in Ontario and across Canada further right.

The media is already strongly suggesting that other politicians could soon be the target of sexual misconduct allegations and similarly purged.

On Thursday, Trudeau "accepted the resignation of"—i.e., fired—federal Sports and Disabilities Minister Kent Hehr, just hours after a woman complained on Twitter that Hehr, who is confined to a wheel chair, had made her feel "unsafe" by making sexual suggestive remarks when they both worked at the Alberta legislature.

The author also recommends:

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