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Brister fired as PC candidate in Essex (With video)



Dave Brister, poses Tues. Jan. 21, 2014, at his Leamington, Ont. workplace. He was fired as the Ontario PC candidate in Essex for publicly criticizing the party's support of right-to-work legislation. (DAN JANISSE/The Windsor Star)

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Dave Brister was fired today as the Ontario PC candidate in Essex for publicly criticizing the party's support of right-to-work legislation.

"I was informed earlier this afternoon that PC HQ prefers followers to leaders & that I am no longer the PC candidate in Essex," he tweeted this afternoon, following a series of tweets criticizing PC Leader Tim Hudak's stand on right-to-work legislation. Brister also took issue with Tory labour critic Monte McNaughton's support of the same legislation.

"I was asked to recant my opposition to RTW legislation in exchange for retaining my position & I refused to do so," Brister tweeted.

Brister was a popular and conservative Windsor city councillor before stepping down to run in Essex in the last Ontario general election in 2011. Brister lost to the NDP's Taras Natyshak.

Hudak released a statement explaining why Brister was booted: "This morning, comments made by Ontario PC candidate Dave Brister were brought to my attention that were unacceptable to the Ontario PC Party. I have made the decision that Dave will no longer stand as the Ontario PC candidate for Essex.

"Ontario needs jobs and no obstacle will stand in the way of our efforts to put this province on the path to prosperity."

Brister said he has spent the last year telling party members, including Hudak, that right-to-work legislation — which allows employees not to join the union at organized workplaces and to therefore not pay union dues — leads to lower wages. He said once employees lose a collective voice, they lose rights and money.

"The simple reality is when I spoke out on it, they came down hard today," Brister said Tuesday, after party officials travelled to Leamington to hand him a pink slip at his office. "Sometimes there's a price to be paid for standing your ground."

Was he surprised the party's reaction was so swift and harsh?

"Quite frankly, yes," he said.

One thing Brister wanted to quickly put to rest, however, was whether he has any thoughts about running for mayor of Windsor, where he served as an outspoken councillor.

"Absolutely none," he said with a laugh. "My wife and I and our son love Kingsville. I will not be moving back to Windsor.

"I do not now, nor have I ever had, any interest in being Windsor mayor."

He said getting the boot from the Progressive Conservative party for speaking his mind has soured him on politics. The 53-year-old says he has no plans to run for any office, and wants to continue working as a business development manager in the greenhouse industry.

"There is no free speech among party members," Brister said. "One of the biggest challenges I see is that when people are elected they are asked to check their opinions, and to a large degree their intelligence, at the door.

"When party loyalty trumps loyalty to residents — as it does now — it's a recipe for disaster. And I'm just not going to be a part of that."

Alan Sakash, the director of communication for the Ontario PC Party, called it "unacceptable" that Brister would criticize a caucus member publicly and said that all members should discuss policy issues internally.

"It has nothing to do with free speech," Sakash said. "What it has to do with is: candidates can't go out and make a policy on their own. And he was making statements about policy. Policy is created by the party and caucus as a whole."

The issue started bubbling over last week when Hudak released a plan to table his Million Jobs Act in the legislature, and reporters started asking why his controversial right-to-work legislation wasn't included.

Liberal Labour Minister Yasir Naqvi released a statement after Brister was fired: "Last week, Tim Hudak tried to fool Ontarians into thinking he had backed away from his most radical of right wing policies. Hudak's so-called right-to-work policy is so extreme that many in his own party cheered what they thought was his decision to drop his anti-union crusade.

"Today we learned Tim Hudak's true intentions to gut worker protections never really changed. Tim Hudak's right-to-work-for-less plan will drive down wages, weaken pensions, and damage the economy — the last thing Ontario families want or need in these tough economic times."

Brister, meanwhile, believes he did the right thing by taking a stand.

"I absolutely don't regret what I did," Brister said. "If I had to do it again, I would do exactly the same thing.

"The way to prosperity is not through lower wages, and that's what right-to-work would do."