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## QP Briefing

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# Tories come out on top in Scarborough-Rouge River byelection

By QP Briefing Staff

Progressive Conservative candidate Raymond Cho won Thursday's Scarborough-Rouge River byelection. Cho had nearly 39 per cent of the vote with 234 out of 234 polls reporting in. The Tory candidate was up by 2,429 votes on Liberal Piragal Thiru, who finished with 29 per cent of the votes.



The Progressive Conservatives hung on to snare a byelection win in Scarborough-Rouge River Thursday night, dodging a bad result after a few days of sex-ed-related controversy.

The kerfuffle was caused by a letter, which vowed to scrap the province's updated sex-ed curriculum, and was signed by PC Leader **Patrick Brown**. But, even with the uproar, Tory candidate **Raymond Cho** managed to claim victory in the northeast Toronto riding.

Cho had nearly 39 per cent of the vote with 234 out of 234 polls reporting in. The Tory candidate was up by 2,429 votes on Liberal **Piragal Thiru**, who finished with 29 per cent of the votes.

NDPer **Neethan Shan** wound up third with about 27 per cent of ballots cast. Voter turnout in Scarborough-Rouge River was just 28 per cent.

At Cho's campaign HQ, a barbecue burned outside a strip-mall office, which was packed with PC supporters. One Tory even dropped a pun about turning Scarborough-Rouge River into Scarborough-*Blue* River.

"There is not any riding in the province Wynne can take for granted," Brown told the PC party crowd. He called Scarborough-Rouge River a former Liberal "stronghold" and "fortress."

The Tories had pushed hard to win the byelection, playing up its significance by noting Scarborough-Rouge River had only been won by Liberals since the riding was created in 1999. The win also gives the PCs their only Toronto-area seat.

Like Brown, Cho was excited about cracking the Liberal grip on Toronto.

"Together, we made history," said the soon-to-be PC MPP, adding that Scarborough-Rouge River was going "from Liberal red to PC blue."

### The sex-ed snafu

And all had appeared to be going to plan for the PCs before a controversial letter surfaced last Friday, vowing that a Tory government would "scrap" Ontario's updated sex-ed curriculum. It also bore the signature of Brown, who quickly reversed course and apologized <sup>1</sup>.

Brown told *QP Briefing* and others that he didn't write the letter and hadn't seen it before it became the object of media interest. He also wouldn't say who wrote the letter.

Questions lingered in the wake of Brown's explanation. As the Liberals gleefully pointed out <sup>2</sup>, the sex-ed letter was authorized by the Tories' CFO. Deputy Premier **Deb Matthews** noted that Brown had been tweeting from Tamilfest in Scarborough-Rouge River when the story hit the press.

The Liberals had also accused Brown of spreading misinformation by sending the sex-ed letter out in Chinese, and failing to correct the record in the same language. Brown, however, told *QP Briefing* he did interviews with Chinese media correcting his stance on sex-ed.

Speaking to reporters Thursday night, Brown repeated that he hadn't penned the letter and that he was "livid" when he returned from a visit to Northern Ontario.

"Certainly I wasn't involved in it, and that's one of the reasons I was so upset about it," he said. "It's quite significant when the party leader coins an op-ed to make his opinions crystal clear."

Brown also said Thursday night that the letter "barely got distributed," and that the affair had probably cost the Tories votes. Even so, he said people were likely "refreshed" by the honesty.

"This was a vote for change. I was glad to win it on the terms that we wanted to win it: on hydro, on jobs, on health care, on education," he told reporters. "I have no interest in wading into social issues."

Evidently the letter didn't have much impact on the byelection. In a general election, however, it could resurface. Brown came to power with help from social conservatives, whose point of view may not be shared by a majority of the general electorate.

Brown has also been trying to reach out to regions and voting blocs that have stayed away from the Tories, such as the unions, who were scared off by Brown's predecessor, **Tim Hudak**, and his vow to cut 100,000 public sector jobs. Brown has also pointed out <sup>3</sup> that he was the first PC leader to march in the Toronto Pride parade.

## DoFo grabs the mic

Cho, though, is a longtime Toronto city councillor, whose campaign was co-managed by **Doug Ford**, he of the late brother **Rob** and a failed mayoral campaign last fall. Ford had also served as a Toronto councillor last term.

Ford, for what it's worth, told reporters he didn't write the sex-ed letter either <sup>4</sup>.

Cho actually handed Ford the microphone during the victory speeches, and the latter quickly fired a shot at the reigning Liberals and Premier **Kathleen Wynne**, who was in Mexico.

"The party's over Kathleen," Ford said. "Finally, the people of Scarborough are going to be heard."

The byelection won't topple the Liberal government, which retains its majority government with 57 seats. The Tories and NDP now hold 29 and 20 seats, respectively.

## The runners up

Shan finished third, but is still the Toronto District School Board trustee for Scarborough-Rouge River. The Liberals had mocked Shan as a "perennial candidate" earlier in the campaign before admitting to the integrity commissioner <sup>5</sup>that the barb was "inappropriate."

Thiru, the runner-up, is an Ontario Liberal Party executive<sup>6</sup> and transit planner. He conceded at the at Grits' election party at the Tropical Nights restaurant, at Morningside and Sheppard Aves.

Ministers **Michael Chan** and **Brad Duguid** gave short speeches for Thiru.

Duguid got loud cheers from the crowd when he talked about Ontario's need for a modern sex-ed curriculum. He said Thiru and his team had run a "clean" and "consistent" campaign. "They stuck to their principles from the beginning to the very end, and didn't change them," he said in an apparent dig at the PCs.

Thiru said this was just his first election with his name on the ballot, and his work is not over yet. He told reporters afterwards he'd consider running again in two years, but would first spend time with his family.

He thanked his volunteers. "You added great vibrancy to our democracy and I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart," he said.

Thiru's campaign had begun on the wrong foot, when his team sent out a media release about the byelection call that managed to arrive in reporters' inboxes before the official word came from the government, and before Elections Ontario could confirm there was, in fact, a byelection on.

The New Democrats filed an official complaint over it, but Elections Ontario declined to investigate.

During the Rogers TV debate, Thiru argued that electing him would help Scarborough – Rouge River, because voters would be getting a member of the governing party with his expertise as a transit planner for York Region.

He stayed out of the fray over the sex-ed curriculum. Instead, Deb Matthews led the party's attack on Patrick Brown, with a press conference earlier this week, in which she all but said Brown was lying about the circumstances surrounding the letter.

The NDP too steered clear of the sex-ed letter drama in the days leading up to the vote. Asked if she thought the curriculum impacted the vote, NDP Leader **Andrea Horwath** said there were a lot of issues raised during the campaign.

"Certainly I think people need to think carefully about the way that the leader of the Conservatives dealt with that issue, not only the most recent iteration, but his entire history, if you will," Horwath told *QP Briefing* after introducing Shan at the NDP's campaign headquarters.

As for the Tory win, Horwath said, "the premier has got a wake up call as a result of this campaign, and rightfully so."

A visibly downcast Shan delivered a speedy concession speech and made the usual rounds of appreciation, to his volunteers, campaign team and his wife and kids, and congratulated Cho on the victory.

"Obviously the results are not what we expected," Shan said. "The Scarborough residents, if you take the support that I got, and support Councillor Raymond Cho got, there was an overwhelming sense of disappointment of being left out...and the lack of respect we've been getting in Scarborough."

### **The candidate who *actually* ran on scrapping sex-ed**

**Queenie Yu**, the independent who ran on the single issue of doing away with the sex-ed curriculum, placed fourth with about 2 per cent of the vote. She told *QP Briefing* Thursday night that the Tories won "precisely" because of Brown's letter purporting to scrap the curriculum, and that some of the voters still believed that he intends to do just that if he is crowned premier in 2018 because his recanting of that note was not translated.

"When Brown subsequently stated that the letter didn't reflect his views, he didn't send a new letter to those same families explaining the reversal of his decision. And of course his new position wasn't translated into Chinese. So now, many families still think that Brown will scrap the new curriculum if he becomes premier. So, naturally, they would vote for him rather than for me," Yu said.

That as a single-issue, independent candidate Yu beat out the Green Party and garnered almost 600 votes is an indication that sex-ed remains very much a touchy subject in some areas, she said.

"There was no other issue that was spoken of more than the sex-ed curriculum. People weren't talking about the economy or taxes or environment or infrastructure. They weren't talking about those big, supposedly important topics. They were talking about sex-ed. And the reason why is because we did a successful campaign and I consider that a victory," Yu said.

Yu added that shortly after the election was called she was approached by two parties (one of them a sitting party) that wanted to know whether she would consider running under their banner in the future. But Yu said she preferred not to disclose who it was that approached her, nor whether she would take them up on their offer to run.

### Byelection result gives premier 'cause for reflection'

Premier **Kathleen Wynne** issued a statement, congratulating Cho on his win.

"The result in Scarborough-Rouge River is disappointing and gives me cause for reflection," she said. "The good people of that riding have elected Liberals for many years. I'll be talking with our Scarborough members in the coming days, as well as our outstanding candidate Pirigal Thiru."

"We heard at the door that hydro rates are increasingly challenging for people," her statement continued. "I understand, as do my Ministers, that the government needs to focus on helping people with their everyday expenses. I'm confident that by the general election, with our government's record - on transit, on education, on rebuilding roads, schools and hospitals - all delivered in a fiscally responsible, way will regain the confidence of the people of Scarborough-Rouge River."

The byelection was triggered after the March resignation of veteran Liberal MPP **Bas Balkissoon**, who offered little explanation for his sudden departure. Balkissoon had defeated both Shan and Cho in the 2014 provincial election, with the Liberal pulling down nearly 39 per cent of the vote to NDP's 31 per cent and the Tory's nearly 28 per cent.

But Scarborough-Rouge River won't be the last byelection called this year. A new MPP is needed for Ottawa-Vanier, a seat former attorney general **Madeleine Meilleur** vacated this summer. Former Tory leader **Tim Hudak** has also signalled he'll resign his Niagara West-Glanbrook seat when the legislature resumes sitting in a few weeks.

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