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Former finance minister Rod Phillips was vacationing here in St. Barts while Premier Doug Ford knew about it.

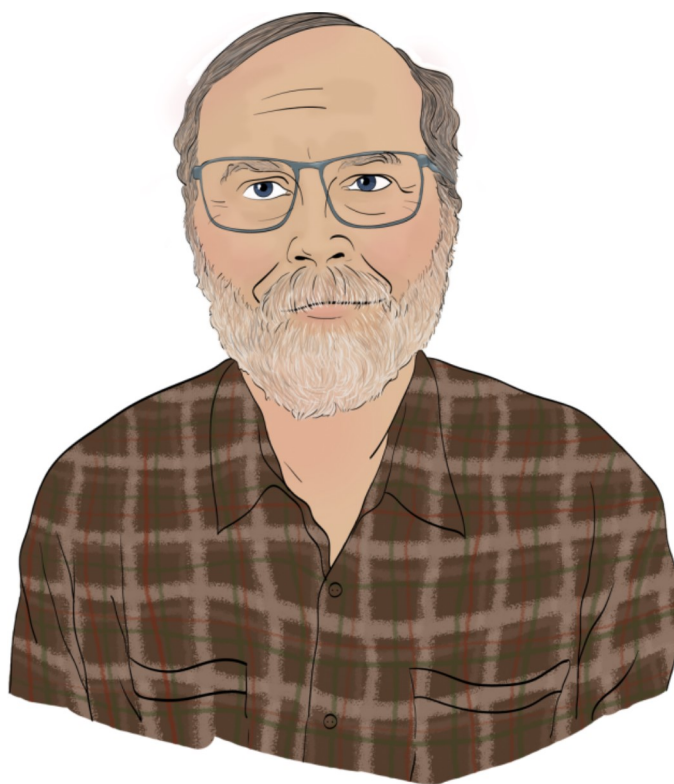
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Caribbean scandal: An apology is not enough when the premier knew all along

Published on January 4, 2021 — in Opinion — by Kirk Winter

It doesn't take a political genius to realize that what the public may remember from the Rod Phillips scandal is that Premier Doug Ford, by his own admission, knew much more about his minister's Caribbean trip than he first let on.

While the rest of Ontario was facing COVID-19 inspired travel restrictions, the premier did nothing to right the public relations disaster before it damaged both he and his government irreparably.



KIRK WINTER, WRITER-AT-LARGE.

Ford admitted at an impromptu press conference that he was aware that Phillips was outside of Canada before news of the minister's stunning lack of judgment cost him his cabinet position on Dec. 31.

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“I did call him shortly after he arrived (in St. Barts) and I asked him and he said he was away,” Ford shared with reporters.

Ford continued, “My mistake, and I take full responsibility. At that time, I should have said get your backside back into Ontario, and I didn’t do that.”

I wonder if this means that Phillip’s indiscretion was only wrong because he and the premier got caught?

This will be the third time since the declaration of the pandemic 10 months ago that Premier Ford has acted contrary to his own public requests and those of public health agencies and asked for forgiveness later.

Last spring while Ontarians stayed at home and left their vacation properties to the vagaries of Mother Nature, Ford travelled to his cottage in Muskoka to “check on the pipes.” When caught he apologized and said it wouldn’t happen again.

Last Mother’s Day the premier and his family, who constituted multiple bubbles, gathered in much larger numbers than his public health people were recommending. When caught he apologized and said it wouldn’t happen again.

When news leaked out about Phillip’s jaunt to a private island, the premier denied initially knowing anything about it. When that line of defence proved no longer tenuous, the premier apologized and said it

wouldn’t happen again.

My wife and I haven’t seen our oldest son and his wife for 10 months because we have been told by the premier that gathering with people outside our bubble is unwise. We missed our daughter-in-law’s birthday, hoping for time at the cottage. We missed a summer at the cottage with them, hoping for Thanksgiving. We missed Thanksgiving hoping for Christmas. We just missed Christmas hoping for his birthday in February. We have done our bit, as have many other Ontarians.

The premier, rather than lead by example, has made it very clear that COVID rules are to only be followed until they interfere with his immediate plans. Social distancing, bubbling and reduced travel are guidelines that can be bent when they need to be. There is a dangerous message in this kind of public behaviour: if it is alright for members of the government it must be fine for the rest of us to ignore public health warnings when inconvenient or bothersome.

Ford and company aren’t the only ones. Multiple politicians from various political parties, including the Liberals and NDP have come forward to admit they left Canada for one reason or another.

Thousands of good and law-abiding Ontarians missed the Christmas season with friends and family because public health and Ford told us to. Unfortunately, and the expected surge in COVID cases over

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the next 14 days may show, a much larger group of Ontarians took their cue from Ford and his cabinet, ignoring the public health warnings they felt were inconvenient and travelled not just within the province, but nationally and internationally, eviscerating any reason for the travel advisory in the first place.

I wonder what kind of apology the premier will have later this month when a surge of COVID cases overwhelm Ontario's urban hospitals.

I hope it's a doozy.

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