



NEWS

Private warnings and public anger: Federal leaders come down hard on politicians who ignored Canada's COVID-19 travel advice

By **Tonda MacCharles** Ottawa Bureau

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OTTAWA—It is, at least, a moment of rare political unity.

Federal leaders on the left and right have given a swift kick to fellow MPs who travelled internationally over the year-end holiday break, as they scrambled to get ahead of the wave of **public anger** that washed over **provincial leaders** who didn't punt their own vacationing members fast enough.

There was little attempt at publicly justifying or explaining away the travel, just a consensus through their actions that the public's angry questioning of whether we're really "all in this together" had hit its mark.

On Tuesday, [Prime Minister Justin Trudeau](#) said he shares the "frustration and indignation" that many Canadians expressed at politicians and others who took vacations outside of the country during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#).

Speaking for the first time since the drip-drip of news reports revealed [more than a dozen Canadian politicians](#) of all stripes took off for sunny climes despite public health warnings against non-essential travel, Trudeau lamented that "so many Canadians" have sacrificed and followed the rules – but "folks who should have known better" did not, including two members of his Liberal caucus.

"It is unfortunate to see a number of politicians not take their own advice," he said. Trudeau said he was "disappointed" in the two Liberal MPs, Kamal Khera and Sameer Zuberi, who lost their parliamentary and committee responsibilities as a result.

He's not the only one.

New Democrat Jagmeet Singh was the first federal leader to act, the day after Ontario's now-former finance minister Rod Phillips was fired Dec. 31 for his trip to a luxury beach resort at St. Bart's.

The NDP quickly scanned the whereabouts of its MPs as reporters asked questions, and discovered Niki Ashton was in Greece.

Ashton had travelled there to visit her ill grandmother but hadn't notified Singh or the party whip of the trip. On Jan. 1, Singh stripped the prominent New Democrat of her cabinet critic duties for transport and for women and gender equality. He expressed sympathy, but in a statement the party said, "Canadians, rightfully, expect their elected representatives to lead by example."

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Politicians who travel care about the rest of

That set the federal bar high.

Or maybe, set it exactly where Canadians expect it to be.

In Ontario, [Alberta](#), Saskatchewan and Quebec, political party leaders were seen as slow to recall or demand resignations of errant elected officials, acting only after headlines stoked widespread public anger.

In quick order Sunday and Monday, the federal Liberals and Conservatives followed Singh's lead and demanded resignations of other MPs who left the country as the pandemic's second wave gathers steam.

More provinces — like Quebec and New Brunswick — are slapping tighter restrictions on public movements as hospitals cancel surgeries, long-term-care homes are again swamped with COVID-19 outbreaks, and a freezer truck was called in to handle an overflowing London morgue — a grim reminder of the ultimate price of an uncontrolled epidemic.

Health-care workers, infectious disease experts and Canada's chief public health officer Dr. Theresa Tam expressed concern, if not incredulity, at the travellers' poor judgment.

"I think right now and the next months are going to be really difficult in Canada," Tam said Tuesday. "So, you know, reducing any risks of importation and escalation of the epidemic or pandemic in Canada is really important."

New variants of the coronavirus that make it more transmissible have been detected in the United Kingdom and South Africa, and although only nine variant cases have been detected in Canada so far, Tam said "avoiding non-essential travel is really critical" because mutations can crop up anywhere.

With a more transmissible virus, she said, "you've really got to double down" on stringent measures if Canada is to have any shot at containing the epidemic.

Tam said it took five months for the first 100,000 COVID-19 cases to emerge in the spring, but the latest 100,000-case increase occurred over the span of just the past two weeks.

With that as a backdrop, political leaders would be wise to be clear — or clearer — where they stand.

[Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole](#), through his whip Blake Richards, left [MP David](#)

Sweet little choice but to resign as chair of the Commons ethics committee, a source said speaking on background.

Sweet had notified the party whip he was legally required to move an RV he had stationed in the Southern U.S., but he failed to notify anyone when his plan to immediately return to Canada shifted and he decided to prolong his “leisure” stay. Sweet says he won’t run again.

O’Toole had explicitly asked his caucus of MPs and senators not to travel during the Christmas holidays.

That makes Conservative Sen. Don Plett’s decision to take a southern vacation in Mexico and Calgary MP Ron Liepert’s trip to his California home to make emergency repairs – and O’Toole’s response to them – more baffling.

In Plett’s case, the senator did not advise O’Toole’s office of the trip in advance.

But Plett reconsidered the wisdom of his Mexican vacation the same day the public uproar over Rod Phillips’s Caribbean vacation led to his sheepish return and resignation. Plett booked a flight back to Manitoba, where he is now quarantined.

O’Toole has not spoken publicly about Plett or Liepert but a source said on background that O’Toole is “disappointed” in his caucus members.

O’Toole cancelled his own family’s planned southern vacation in March when the pandemic first hit, and the source said he has been clear since taking over the leadership in August that MPs should not travel internationally.

But the source also underscored that Plett’s role as leader of the Opposition in the Senate is an elected position, chosen by his fellow senators, not one O’Toole appoints.

Still, Plett is a member of the Conservative Party caucus and as party leader, O’Toole has the power to condemn actions he deems inappropriate, even to mete out discipline as he sees fit.

In Liepert’s case, the MP advised the party whip and stuck to his travel plan, unlike Sweet. The source distinguished his case from Sweet’s, saying he didn’t switch gears without telling anyone, and in any event Liepert held no formal critic’s role.

The Bloc Québécois and the Greens say none of their MPs, nor the Greens' unelected leader Annamie Paul, has left the country.

Lucky for them, because Canadians' patience has clearly worn thin.

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