

RESTORE PUBLIC TRUST IN EMERGENCY ALERTS

Here's a political safety alert for Premier Doug Ford.

The emergency warning system in Ontario just suffered a serious breakdown and his government needs to fix it pronto.

Millions of Ontarians will vouch for the need for urgent action. They're the ones who received the rudest of rude awakenings early Sunday morning Jan. 12 when a screeching blast from their cellphones informed them of an "incident" at the Pickering Nuclear Generating Station.

Before being told nearly two hours later it was all a bad mistake and that there had been no "incident" of any kind, widespread concern, confusion and even fear swept across southern Ontario.

Despite being told from the start that "there has been NO abnormal release of radioactivity from the station," people were left wondering if they'd been told the full story and what might really be happening. One family in Toronto booked a hotel in Niagara Falls and got ready to flee.

And given memories of the nuclear disasters at Chernobyl, Ukraine, in 1986 and Fukushima, Japan, in 2011, who can say they overreacted? This is one of the world's biggest nuclear power stations located close to Canada's biggest city.

The apology from the provincial government for what it calls "human error" behind the original text message is appropriate.

But Ford's Progressive Conservatives will be judged by how well they keep their promise to ensure nothing like this happens again.

The mistake was made by the Provincial Emergency Operations Centre during a routine training exercise. But how did a message meant to be sent to an internal list go out to the general population? Why did it take the emergency operations centre nearly two hours to send out its correction?

After all, Ontario Power Generation had tweeted the message that nothing was amiss at Pickering more than an hour before that correction. But that didn't reach millions of people still fretting over the first alert.

Even more to the point, why hasn't the Ontario government - either the current PC regime or their Liberal predecessors - already dealt with the known problems in the alert system?

In 2017, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk said provincial emergency management systems need better oversight and co-ordination. Specifically, she found that the province lacks a co-ordinated information technology system for emergency management.

The Liberal government knew this and spent \$7.5 million over six years trying to set up such a system before discontinuing the project in 2015. If the Ford government needed a reason to take up this task, the screw-up surrounding the Pickering nuclear station gives them a big one.

One of the worst consequences of the blunder is that people could lose confidence in the emergency alert system altogether.

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SNAPSHOT



Tony Fortunato photo

A picturesque winter scene graces Trafalgar Road, just north of Ballinafad. Got a great local photo you'd like to share? Send it to sleblanc@metroland.com, along with a brief description.

VOICE YOUR OPINION ON OUR ECONOMY

PARTICIPATION IN NEW SURVEY WILL OFFER VALUABLE INFORMATION, WRITES PETER WATSON



PETER
WATSON
Column

What you and others think about the Canadian economy is important. A new survey is being officially introduced by the Bank of Canada to monitor consumer sentiment.

Every three months 2,000 Canadian households will be asked their expectations on inflation, interest rates, jobs, wages, spending plans, and local house prices. This new economic indicator is titled the Canadian Survey of Consumer Expectations.

These types of questions

have been asked of businesses for the last 15 years. Having equivalent information from the consumer perspective is important to help address gaps in existing sources of information on household behaviour.

Inspired by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's Survey of Consumer Expectations, the Bank of Canada survey has been tested over the last five years, and as of January it will become official. We are at a critical point in our economic evolution for several reasons.

The current economic prosperity is one of the longest expansion periods in our history. Consumer spending and escalating residential real estate values have been fuelled by historically low interest rates.

Household debt has climbed steadily, and the Bank of Canada has considered this troublesome for many years. The million dollar question is how will consumers react when this current economic peri-

od of prosperity declines?

Understanding ongoing consumer attitudes will be critical information for the Bank of Canada to do its job, which is to manage the health and prosperity of the Canadian economy.

There is a parallel to what the Bank of Canada is studying and how each one of us should manage our finances. The issue is financial health.

To maintain financial health, both our country and each individual household must look ahead to anticipate potential problems.

Do you have mortgage, consumer, and other personal debt that is too high? If interest rates start to rise, at what point will you not be able to service your debt?

Peter Watson, of Watson Investments MBA, CFP®, R.F.P., CIM®, FCSI offers a weekly financial planning column, Dollars & Sense. He can be contacted through www.watsoninvestments.com.

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