

ONTARIO DISGRACED

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Doug Ford's Conservative government has shown its true colours with the awarding of the Order of Ontario to disgraced former Premier Mike Harris. Reaction has been swift and widespread across civil society as people recall the callous behavior of the Harris regime. His 1995 "Common Sense Revolution" brought the worst traits of the politics of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan into Canada's largest province. Greed and avarice were glorified, while millions of Ontarians were marginalized.

Indigenous groups recall his words that set in motion the events leading to the OPP killing of Dudley George – "I want those f**king Indians out of the park". Anti-poverty activists point to the massive cuts to welfare rates and social housing that saw homelessness spiral out of control. Equity groups remember how he used "dog whistle" racist messaging to win his majority, and immediately repealed employment equity legislation and shut down the Anti-Racism Secretariat. Construction workers saw housing and transit projects cancelled and \$100 million wasted to fill in the Eglinton subway excavation.

Wholesale attacks on workers' rights and public services sparked the Days of Action – general strikes in city after city to protest the Harris agenda. Then came the assault on public education, with the Minister aiming to "create a crisis in education" in order to gut the entire system. We saw the undermining of workplace safety and massive cuts to healthcare. The Conservatives closed hospitals and compared laid-off nurses to "makers of hula-hoops unhappy with their jobs being changed". Highway 407 was sold for a song. Each year brought new attacks on collective bargaining and workers' rights. Until, finally, Harris stepped down and in the 2003 election the Conservatives were crushed.

Before he left politics, Harris oversaw a massive expansion of private companies into homecare and the long-term care sector, while lowering standards of care. As the COVID pandemic revealed, these companies are making immense profit from a business model based on poverty wages, precarious work, and cutting corners. Today, Harris stands out as Chair of the Board of Chartwell, making \$237,000 a year for a part time position. And the death toll mounts.

How could a supposedly neutral Advisory Council on the Order of Ontario make such a recommendation? Maybe because Ford has stacked the Council with Conservative operatives such as Julian Fantino, Paul Godfrey, Isabel Basset and Ted Arnot. They also saw fit to award the man behind the sleazy full-page newspaper ads attacking teachers under the guise of Vaughan Working Families – Michael DeGasperis. It's all part of political payback - standard procedure today for a political tribe that has long ago lost its moral compass.

The Executive Board recommends that the Labour Council call for the retract the award of Order of Ontario to Mike Harris, and shine a powerful light on his shameful record – one that deserves the scorn and contempt of all Ontarians.