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Chartered by the Canadian Labour Congress  
Affiliated with the Ontario Federation of Labour

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Premier of Ontario  
Legislative Building  
Queen's Park  
Toronto ON M7A 1A1

Dear Sir,

***“The Order of Ontario is the province’s highest honour. It is reserved for Ontarians from all fields of endeavour and backgrounds, whose excellence has left a lasting legacy in the province, Canada and beyond. Members of the Order are a collective of Ontario’s finest citizens, whose contributions have shaped – and continue to shape – the province’s history and place in Canada.”*** (Ontario Government Website)

Peterborough & District Labour Council joins countless others in calling for the revocation of the Order of Ontario to former Premier Mike Harris. While there is no doubt that Mike Harris’ tenure as leader of this province left a lasting legacy of sorts, the idea that his reprehensible record reflects excellence does not pass muster. The damage his leadership has caused, and continues to cause, in this province is beyond compare as it continues to reverberate throughout many of our public institutions and the lives of the most vulnerable in this province. Mike Harris does not deserve to be included in the Order of Ontario based on this legacy.

For so many in Ontario, this ill-advised recognition of Mike Harris by Doug Ford’s Conservative government, exposes the true values and attitudes that Doug Ford holds towards public services. The memories of the heartless and insensitive behaviour of the Harris administration are still being felt by Ontarians in all sectors. The 1995 “Common Sense Revolution” was the start of the Harris legacy of destruction, marginalization, the erosion of rights and safety, and the decline of the province of Ontario. This hardly describes a legacy of excellence.

- The words of Mike Harris haunt Indigenous groups and others as they were the words that set into motion the events that led to the OPP killing Dudley George. This is not reconciliation in any way, shape, or form. In the words of Alderville First Nation Chief Dave Mowat, “This will remain forever a bad decision and a stain on the selection process by this advisory council.” At a time when the Truth and Reconciliation Committee’s 94 “Call to Actions” are just starting to be implemented, to reward Mike Harris for these actions is repugnant. It flies in the face of any progress we have made with the First Nations of our Province.

Mike Harris’ legacy is one of slash and burn – he did not lead for all of us, but for the select few. A few examples of this include his massive cuts to welfare rates and social housing which saw

homelessness rise dramatically. We will never forget the Harris government shutting down the Anti-Racism Secretariat and repealing employment equity legislation all while disparaging unions and what they stood for. His attacks on workers' rights and public services demonstrated the disdain he felt towards unions. Unions are self-funded and powerful enough to disrupt his messaging, so they needed to be shut down. The Days of Action – general strikes in cities across the province were staged to protest his agenda. Every year, new attacks on collective bargaining were brought forward and insults hurled towards the public servants that allow Ontario to function. Massive cuts to healthcare arrived along with the closure of hospitals. Through John Snobelen and his “Create a Crisis in Education”, Mike Harris began to attack and decimate Ontario's public education system. The effects of his changes to the funding formula alone is another legacy still in play today.

The privatization of public services was a priority item for Mike Harris. He lowered the standards of care for seniors, along with expanding the corporate for-profit industry into long-term care homes as well as homecare. COVID-19 has revealed what those working in the sector know too well: these companies are making an immense profit from his business model that is based on poverty wages, precarious work, and cutting corners. Sitting on the board of Chartwell making six figures a year for a part-time position haunts the families of all those losing their lives.

The undermining of workplace safety by reducing regulations was another trademark of Mike Harris. When Mike Harris cut safety standards and inspections, the water system in the town of Walkerton was put into peril with over 2,000 residents sickened and seven fatalities occurring. Tainted water is only one of his legacies for now, with his addition to the Order, that he is being rewarded for.

One must question how a supposedly neutral advisory council on the Order of Ontario can make a recommendation like this. Political payback comes to mind. Ford's appointees to this committee reek of privilege and many are proud donors of the Conservative party.

The suffering felt by Ontarians because of the Mike Harris Legacy continue on a grand scale today: long-term care homes devastated by illness and disrepair; healthcare workers exhausted and many underpaid; students, parents, educators abandoned as they strain to make a broken system work; workers that are unable to quarantine with no paid sick days; mass evictions and increased homelessness; local businesses destroyed while corporate donors increase their profit margins. Our current Ford government has opened Chapter 2 of the Mike Harris legacy.

Circling back to the criteria of the Order of Ontario: ***“whose excellence has left a lasting legacy in the province”, “collective of Ontario's finest citizens, whose contributions have shaped – and continue to shape – the province's history”***

Mike Harris has fulfilled the lasting legacy in a disastrous and catastrophic manner. His contributions have shaped and continue to shape the province's history in ways that Ontario may never recover from. Somewhere along the way, the advisory council missed the words “excellence” and “finest citizens”.

We, Peterborough & District Labour Council, call for a revocation of the Order of Ontario to Mike Harris.