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## Ford under fire as opposition condemns ‘political meddling’ in tribunal appointments process

*The IJF revealed Wednesday that majority of senior tribunal chairs appear to have Conservative ties*

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*John Fraser, interim leader of the Ontario Liberal Party speaks to the media during a press conference at Queens Park on Aug. 9, 2023. The Ontario Liberals and other opposition parties slammed Doug Ford for what they call “political” appointments to Ontario’s tribunals. (The Canadian Press/Arlyn McAdorey)*

Opposition leaders are condemning the Ford government following [an IJF investigation](#) that revealed a majority of senior tribunal members in Ontario have Conservative connections.

Six of the nine senior chairs of the province’s most influential tribunals appear to have either donated money to, served as a high-ranking staffer for, or run for political office under the banner of a Canadian conservative party, according to analysis from the IJF.

“Absolutely we’re concerned about these findings,” said Kristyn Wong-Tam, Ontario NDP MPP and critic for the attorney general, describing the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party as promoting “political meddling.” “The Ford Conservatives have been corrupting the political process since they took office with political patronages.”

“The public want to trust their publicly-funded justice and tribunal system and, in this case, with all the political insider patronages, it’s very difficult for them to do so,” added Wong-Tam.

“These findings are not a surprise. Time and time again, we see the Ford Government reward well connected insiders,” said the interim leader of the Ontario Liberals, MPP John Fraser. “The Ford Government has gutted Ontario's Tribunals of experience and expertise.”

Many of the major tribunals examined by the IJF have already faced greater scrutiny in recent months amid a high [backlog of cases](#), meaning some claimants are waiting years to have their disputes resolved.

Experts partially attribute the delays to the scale of the politicization at Tribunals Ontario.

“The leadership of Tribunals Ontario and its constituent tribunals is dominated by people with clear political affiliation who were appointed with little or no subject expertise or adjudication experience,” [wrote](#) retired solicitor Voy Stelmaszynski in a recent article on behalf of Tribunal Watch Ontario, an independent watchdog organization that advocates for adjudicative independence in the province.

Neither the Ontario PC Party nor Tribunals Ontario responded to requests for comment.

The opposition party comments come amid a barrage of criticism levelled against the Ford government in recent months for other cases of alleged political patronage.

The Ontario PCs were criticized for bringing back [King's Counsel designations](#) earlier this year, honorary titles given to prominent lawyers that were phased out in 1985 due to claims of patronage. Several Ontario PC MPPs, ministers, senior staffers and party donors were [awarded the designation](#) by Ford. On Wednesday, the IJF [reported](#) that six of the nine senior tribunal appointees appear to have been awarded the King's Counsel designation earlier this year.

The government is also facing backlash over appointing former Toronto Police Service Chief Mark Saunders as special advisor for the redevelopment of Ontario Place. A [freedom of information request](#) revealed last week that he had produced no work for the board despite being paid [\\$700 per day](#) in the position.

Saunders previously ran as an [Ontario PC candidate](#) in the 2022 provincial election.

The biggest scandal faced by the Ford government in recent months has been the opening up of Greenbelt lands to development.

The Narwhal and The Toronto Star in a [joint investigation](#) identified several prominent Greater Toronto Area-based developers with ties to Ford and his family who had purchased the then-undevelopable lands just before they were stripped of Greenbelt protection, leading to widespread outrage among opponents of the Ford government. Ford [reversed the decision](#) to open up the Greenbelt last month. The RCMP [announced on Tuesday](#) that it would be launching a criminal investigation into the matter.

Back in 2019, just months after being elected to office, Ford faced his first [patronage scandal](#) after it was revealed that [several key government positions](#) with six-figure salaries were filled with Conservative supporters, including commissioner of the Ontario Provincial Police and the chair of the Education Quality and Accountability Office.

In response to the criticism, Ford [rescinded](#) some of the appointments and accepted the [resignation](#) of his chief of staff, Dean French.

Some opposition politicians are calling for reforms to eliminate partisan control over the tribunal appointments process.

“Our party has supported Tribunal Watch Ontario’s recommendation to create an independent Adjudicative Tribunal Justice Council,” said Wong-Tam. The [proposal](#) from Tribunal Watch Ontario urges for the creation of a non-partisan body which would oversee the appointment of tribunal posts.

“This is how we would avoid corruption, and this is how we can put the faith of people back into our judicial and tribunal system,” said Wong-Tam.

“Tribunals are meant to be merit based, where the best, most qualified people are selected for the job. Appointees make important decisions that directly impact peoples' lives,” said Fraser. “The principle of merit must be followed so that Ontarians get timely access to justice and a fair hearing.”

*With files from Xavier Richer Vis.*