

Former finance minister broke Elections Act during local visit

Written By MIKE BAKER

Former federal finance minister Bill Morneau has been charged with breaking election rules following a visit to Dufferin-Caledon last year.

In a report published last Thursday (Sept. 10), Yves Cote, Commissioner of Canada Elections, found that Mr. Morneau broke a section of the Canada Elections Act when he shared photos taken at a pair of events, one of them in Caledon, on his official social media channels.

On Aug. 27, 2019, Mr. Morneau, in his capacity as the Minister of Finance, was given a tour of Spirit Tree Estate Cidery in Caledon, where he met with local families and business leaders. Michele Fisher, the Liberal Party candidate in Dufferin-Caledon for the 2019 federal election, attended the tour. Both Mr. Morneau and Ms. Fisher shared a photo of their meeting at the tour on the respective personal social media accounts.

Following the tour, Mr. Morneau spoke with the Free Press, discussing Ms. Fisher's credentials as a prospective Member of Parliament.

'It seems to me that having someone who has a fresh approach for this area, who has an understanding of the business community and the opportunities, is really important,' Mr. Morneau said.

A second event, taking place earlier on July 29, 2019, saw Mr. Morneau meet with Liberal Party candidate Anita Anand at an event in Oakville. At this event, described as a roundtable discussion with local business leaders, business owners and residents, Mr. Morneau singled out Ms. Anand, highlighting her 'significant accomplishments' and supporting her bid to become an MP in Oakville.

Mr. Morneau would later publish a post about his Oakville visit on his Facebook account, which included a photo of himself and Ms. Anand.

According to Mr. Cote, federal ministers are prohibited from using public resources and funds from their departmental budgets for partisan purposes. A guide published in 2015, titled Open and Accountable Government, states that all federal ministers should ensure that official Government of Canada communications be consistent with overall government objectives and decisions. Specifically, the guide notes that ministers ensure that all official government communication products, included social media accounts, be devoid of partisan content.

Mr. Cote felt the comments made by Mr. Morneau at the event in Oakville provided a partisan benefit to Ms. Anand and the Liberal Party. He would go on to state that, by introducing and promoting both Ms. Fisher and Ms. Anand at the two events, this caused the expenses related to these events to benefit the Liberal Party.

This is where Mr. Morneau, essentially, broke the Elections Act, according to Mr. Cote. The Act prohibits anyone but individuals from donating to political parties. Since the federal government footed the bill for the two events, to the tune of \$1,661, it was determined that Mr. Morneau had circumvented the rules.

In his report, Mr. Cote says 'there is no indication that Mr. Morneau intended to use public resources for directly partisan purposes. Nor is there any indication that Mr. Morneau personally participated in planning any of the tours in question'. Mr. Cote also noted that Mr. Morneau and his office cooperated fully with the investigation.

Mr. Morneau has been ordered to pay a \$300 fine for his actions, accounting for \$150 per tour. He has also been asked to

acknowledge the charge on his social media channels, which he did so last Thursday.