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POLITICS

OPINION

Doug Ford's mixed messages on masks is not a good look

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Face masks are changing the face of the pandemic.

So why is Doug Ford being so two-faced about it?

To his credit, the premier is a masked man in most public settings. To his discredit, he won't make it mandatory indoors for everyone — everywhere across the province.

Ford goes in front of television cameras unmasked to avoid muffling his message. But it's still a mixed message:

Masks are necessary. But not mandatory.

The science is clear. The political science is murky.

Masks save lives. Politicians prefer to save their own skins.

Ford publicly supports mandatory masks only municipally. Why not provincially?

He's not arguing that it's a matter of geography — avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to spare isolated regions that are sitting pretty and sitting out the pandemic. In fact, the reverse is true, because as more regions reopen — reuniting residents in risky close proximity — the greater the onus on people to cover up and minimize a recurrence.

Around the country and the world, regions that successfully resisted transmission are suffering second waves — from Alberta to Australia, and Israel to South Korea. The more COVID-19 spreads, the more we learn about the illusion of immunity — and the immeasurable benefits of covering up.

Mayors from across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area have repeatedly asked Ford to exercise leadership by legislating a mask requirement province-wide, backed by provincial authority. This week, Toronto asked the province to enforce masks in bars and restaurants.

Against that backdrop, our premier mumbles that the real challenge is enforcement — it's too messy provincially, so he's delegating it to others to do the heavy lifting on masking. Our mayors counter that it's equally tricky municipally, yet they step up to the challenge while Ford ducks — and cheers them on.

"I encourage everyone, but we just can't enforce it," Ford says, throwing up his hands — and throwing the political football right back at municipalities. "If the community, the mayors and everyone wants to do that ... good luck to them. I don't disagree, by the way."

He doesn't disagree. He just won't agree to do it.

It's called having it both ways. To be perfectly clear, Ford isn't hiding behind a civil liberties or libertarian argument — he agrees with making it mandatory — he simply prefers to take the path of least resistance to avoid antagonizing his rural base.

Better to let local mayors take the heat on masks, even though it's not a big ask: Quebec has imposed a province-wide ban, while neighbouring Michigan has implemented a statewide requirement — despite local political resistance.

Ford abdicating his responsibility creates absurdity: Provincially run GO trains initially refused to make masks mandatory, while the municipally-run TTC subways required them. Both transit services operated under the same roof at Union Station with different rules.

Mercifully, provincially-run Metrolinx reversed course last week on the GO rules, belatedly falling in line with the subway lines. But those who travel outside Toronto on their own steam will encounter a province still going in circles.

It is a confusing roll call, region by region, day by day, week by week — even within the GTA. If you drove last week from Toronto (masks required) to Burlington (merely recommended) carrying COVID-19 under your breath, you could remove your face covering once you crossed municipal lines (thankfully, Burlington caught up to the rest of the GTA Monday).

If you're confused, cottage country is also a crap shoot: Masks in Muskoka are mandatory, but the Kawarthas took its time and Peterborough has been dragging its feet.

Every municipal council in Ontario has been required to relitigate the matter and reinvent the wheel. Here's the paradox, expressed perfectly by one politician in the know:

"It's really, really important that as we're opening the economy, people still need to follow the public health rules to keep the physical distancing, to wear face masks if they're not able to do that."

That admonition came Monday from Health Minister Christine Elliott, as the premier listened from a safe distance at their news conference. Yet between the two of them, the message is more mixed than ever.

All these months later, with so many lives lost — not just at-risk nursing home residents and health-care staff, but vulnerable airport taxi drivers and supermarket cashiers — the government now knows what few realized at first: Wearing a facial covering saves lives — yours and others — by reducing the spread of COVID-19.

Remember the desperate shortages of protective equipment that imperiled front-line workers? Now there is a surfeit of supply but a shortage of demand, due to a lack of political will.

Compared to the massive personal and financial challenges of securing nursing homes and reviving shuttered industries, nothing is more cost-effective and life-saving than making masks mandatory indoors. If only everyone would wear them, everywhere in Ontario — not thanks to the kindness of strangers, but courtesy of Queen's Park doing the right thing.



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