

Stakeholders praise McNaughton legacy after surprise departure

Don Wall September 25, 2023

The sudden announcement by Ontario Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development Monte McNaughton on Sept. 22 that he is leaving politics for a career in the private sector has surprised construction stakeholders, with most praising his accomplishments over four years but leaving some to wonder what comes next.

“If you look at the results and the output, that was great as well. He was one of the best ministers I’ve had the opportunity to deal with in my 35 years of dealing in public policy,” said Skills Ontario CEO Ian Howcroft.

“Monte was tireless, he really did a great job,” added Richard Lyall, president of the Residential Construction Council of Ontario.

The four-term MPP for Lambton-Kent-Middlesex assumed the labour portfolio for the Doug Ford government in 2019, later adding immigration. He announced his departure one day after the premier reversed the government’s controversial decision to remove lands from Greenbelt protection but said in a statement the timing was unrelated.

“I realize that recent events will cause some to speculate about the reasons for my departure. I want those people to know that my decision is completely unrelated to those events,” McNaughton stated.

“I support Premier Ford and am proud to have served in his cabinet.”

Ford also issued a statement, remarking, “He introduced groundbreaking measures to protect workers’ rights and ensure that more workers are in the driver’s seat of their own careers.

“Monte helped build a coalition of private-sector union support that has never existed in the history of the Ontario PC Party.”

Later Ford named David Piccini, the environment minister for the past two years, as the new labour minister.

McNaughton was trending on X, formerly Twitter. Victoria Mancinelli, director of strategic partnerships with LIUNA, one of several building trades unions that supported the Conservatives during the 2022 election campaign, tweeted, “Monte McNaughton has made invaluable contributions to skilled trades across Ontario. Despite party lines, respecting the leadership and collaboration Monte has demonstrated to build a comprehensive skilled trades strategy.”

Stakeholders cited McNaughton's efforts to collaborate with the construction sector, establish Skilled Trades Ontario (STO), boost the skilled trades, strengthen workplace health and safety and support constructors and workers during the pandemic as among his major accomplishments.

Marc Arsenault, business manager of the Provincial Building Trades Council and Wayne Peterson, executive director of the Construction Employers Coordinating Council of Ontario, issued a joint statement: "Monte has been a partner in professionalizing the skilled trades and truly valuing the work of the women and men that build the necessary infrastructure to keep Ontario's economy moving. He was a champion during the challenging times of the pandemic, to improving health and safety on jobsites, to investing in the growth of the industry."

McNaughton shepherded the transition from the Ontario College of Trades to launch STO in January 2020, introducing major reforms to Ontario's trades and apprenticeship training system. Ministry initiatives such as the Skills Development Fund and the Skilled Trades Strategy have brought hundreds of thousands of new apprentices on stream, the ministry boasted earlier this year.

Nadia Todorova, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, commented, "Ontario has more workers to build our future and a better workplace environment to do it thanks to Monte's vision and commitment to growing our industry for the better."

Karen Renkema, Ontario vice-president at the Progressive Contractors Association of Canada, added, "The Skills Development Fund has made it possible for hundreds of employers to train workers, and provided thousands of workers with the opportunity to learn a skilled trade."

The ministry increasingly supported the Building Trades in their delivery of skilled trades training, including capital funding for union-led training centres. McNaughton addressed the Building Trades conference in October 2022, urging the unions to forward training proposals. RESCON'S Lyall suggested McNaughton's policies marginally favoured labour over employers.

"He was arguably, quite possibly, a little more friendly to labour, but nothing's wrong with that, especially at a time when you've got labour shortages and you're trying to fix a system," said Lyall, who stated there is still work to do to bolster the workforce. "The pathways are still kind of muddy and the job's not done yet."

Patrick McManus, chair of the Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance, said McNaughton was one of the most accessible ministers in government.

"His push to promote careers in the skilled trades over the last four years is unprecedented in modern government," he said.

Last year the ministry introduced Level Up! career fairs to high schools. Ontario General Contractors Association president Giovanni Cautillo saluted the ministry's school outreach, stating, "He has continually focused his mandate to ensure that the communication to children, as young as kindergarten, highlighted the positive results that a career in the trades can provide."

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