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News

P.E.I. sees rise in anti-outsider sentiment as COVID-19 travel restrictions ease

The Canadian Press

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The Confederation Bridge is viewed from Borden-Carleton, P.E.I. on Friday, Sept. 27, 2013. Canada's smallest province, which once branded itself the "gentle island," is seeing some not-so-gentle attitudes emerging toward people perceived to be from other provinces, a phenomenon Prince Edward Island Premier Dennis King says is likely driven by COVID-19 fears. ANDREW VAUGHAN / THE CANADIAN PRESS

In place of a signature, the author signed it from “all of P.E.I.”

“When we found the note after a visit to a beautiful park, it definitely was disappointing,” Leslie said Saturday.

Leslie has now placed a sign in her front and back windows indicating she is an Island resident, which she believes has helped avoid further conflicts.

If only we had not become afraid of each other during these months, perhaps people could feel more at ease

Other similar incidents have been reported on social media in recent weeks. Jordan Bujold, a student at the Atlantic Veterinary College in Charlottetown, published a photo of her car on Facebook last week showing a large note in the window saying, “AVC student. Been here since January. Please don’t damage my car again!”

In an accompanying note, she says her car with New Brunswick licence plates had been keyed and that the same thing had happened to a woman she’d been speaking with who has Ontario plates.

Others with out-of-town licence plates have reported being challenged in parking lots of grocery and retail stores by residents who quiz them on their travel history.

These incidents come on the heels of weeks of heated debate among locals about the province’s decision to allow seasonal residents to come to their cottages from provinces with active cases of the novel coronavirus.

This debate has even spilled into the provincial legislature, with the Opposition and Green party leader Peter Bevan-Baker blaming Islanders’ uncharacteristic hostility toward outsiders on the King government for what he believes has been inconsistent messaging.

King acknowledges the province’s initial four-phase plan to gradually lift restrictions has been more accelerated, but he maintains all decisions to ease restrictions have been made in consultation with the province’s chief public health office.

“From the beginning of this, we realized that we had to evolve and adapt every day on a lot of the decisions that we’ve been making,” he said in an interview Saturday.

“I certainly feel confident in the process that we put together from the position that everything has been based on the best data and science and the best public health information.”

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He characterized the anti-outsider sentiment as “isolated incidents” and believes they were sparked by fear of the unknown triggered by a concerning resurgence of COVID-19 cases in some American states.

“My own belief is that many people in our province and beyond have been watching events as they transpire around the world and maybe transporting that back here,” he said.

“For example if you see what’s taking place in Florida, it’s vastly different than what takes place here, so I think that’s a big part of it.”

Next week, starting July 3, travel and self-isolation restrictions for people within the four Atlantic provinces will be lifted, thanks to an “Atlantic bubble” announced by the four Atlantic premiers this week.

King says he hopes Atlantic tourists will remember how hospitable P.E.I. has always been in the past and not see these recent negative incidents as a disincentive to come to the Island.

“Certainly it is my great hope that we will roll out the welcome mat for those who are visiting P.E.I.,” King said.

“The experience, if it is a little bit different because of COVID, I certainly hope it won’t be any different from a hospitality situation.”

Leslie echoed this, noting that P.E.I.’s economy relies heavily on the tourism industry, which has been devastated by the pandemic’s travel restrictions to date.

“These are anxious times for everyone. My hope is people will feel welcomed as visitors from off- Island,” she said.

“If only we had not become afraid of each other during these months, perhaps people could feel more at ease.”



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TRENDING

Canada's smallest province, which once branded itself the "gentle island," is seeing some not-so-gentle attitudes emerging toward people perceived to be from other provinces — a phenomenon Prince Edward Island Premier Dennis King says is likely driven by COVID-19 fears.

The province has been closed to all non-essential travellers since April 17 and only began allowing seasonal residents from within Canada to submit applications to travel there on June 1.

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These travel restrictions have been lauded as being key to keeping the virus contained to only 27 cases in total since the pandemic began — now all recovered — with no hospitalizations, no deaths and no community spread of the disease.

But with cottage owners now arriving on the Island, several people with out-of-province licence plates have had their cars vandalized, have been confronted or have had nasty notes left for them in incidents known locally as "plate shaming."

Miriam Leslie, a local pastor, is leasing a car with Nova Scotia licence plates and discovered a note left on her windshield earlier this month that said, "Go the (expletive) back to the mainland."

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