

Fage quits cabinet amid allegations he fled accident scene

MLA will continue to represent Cumberland North riding
By AMY SMITH Provincial Reporter

Tory cabinet minister Ernie Fage resigned Thursday night amid allegations he fled the scene of a late-night collision six weeks ago after rear-ending a stopped car with his government vehicle at a Halifax intersection.

It's the second time in less than a year that Mr. Fage has quit cabinet in controversy.

"Tonight at 7:30, I accepted Ernie Fage's verbal resignation from cabinet," Premier Rodney MacDonald told reporters shortly afterward in the lobby of One Government Place.

"Mr. Fage was involved in a car accident on Nov. 24 in Halifax. He said he did not want the incident to be a distraction from his job or from the work of the government."

The premier said Carolyn Bolivar-Getson, the Lunenburg West MLA, would take over as human resources minister and minister responsible for the Public Service Commission and the Emergency Management Office.

Mr. Fage will stay on as Cumberland North MLA.

David Gamble, a professional photographer, came forward Thursday with photos and a video he took with his camera phone on the night of the crash, which occurred early on Nov. 24 on Sackville Street, just outside the CBC Radio building.

He said he didn't realize until Wednesday that the man driving the second car was Mr. Fage.

"(He) definitely smelled of alcohol," Mr. Gamble said Thursday. "I can't say that he was over the limit without a breathalyser or whatever."

The driver of the first car was George Myrer, assistant sports editor with The Chronicle Herald, and his passenger was scoreboard page editor Steve Bezanson. Both men were heading home after work and were later treated for whiplash.

Mr. Myrer said he was at a red light waiting to turn left onto South Park Street when he looked into his rear-view mirror just as a Volkswagen Jetta struck his 2002 Nissan Sentra. The crash caused \$3,500 damage to Mr. Myrer's car.

Mr. Myrer said he got out of his vehicle to see if the Jetta driver was OK.

"I leaned into his car a little bit and I could smell what I perceived to be alcohol, without a doubt in my mind," he said. "He slurred about a couple of words to me. I couldn't quite make

them out and he rolled up his window and that was the last actual contact I had with him verbally.”

By that point, Mr. Myrer said, Mr. Gamble had driven up in his vehicle and checked to see if he was all right. Mr. Myrer replied that he thought the Jetta driver was going to leave. Mr. Myrer stood in front of the Jetta for a moment and then thought better of it and stepped back, he said.

Then, according to Mr. Gamble and Mr. Myrer, the Jetta backed up, sped into the oncoming lane, ran a red light and turned left onto South Park.

Mr. Gamble said he got into his truck and followed the Jetta to an apartment building on College Street and into an underground garage. The Jetta drove around and around the lot for a bit before settling into a parking spot, Mr. Gamble said.

On the video, Mr. Gamble can be heard asking the Jetta driver why he left the accident scene but the man does not answer.

“He was fumbling. He was fumbling with stuff. He was acting sort of erratically,” Mr. Gamble said. “But he wasn’t saying a whole lot. He wasn’t talking.”

Mr. Gamble said he thinks Mr. Fage should be charged with leaving the scene of an accident.

“I think definitely somebody who has the responsibility of making laws and legislation should have at least been honourable enough to call somebody the next day and say, ‘Hey, I shouldn’t have left. I was in an accident yesterday. What can I do?’.”

Mr. Bezanson said he was surprised the Jetta driver didn’t get out of his car to see if he and Mr. Myrer were OK and apologize.

“He just looked like a man who had a few,” Mr. Bezanson said.

There is no proof that Mr. Fage was impaired and he has not been charged with any offence.

It was raining at the time of the crash and none of the men recognized the Jetta driver as Mr. Fage.

Mr. Gamble, who owns About Image Photography on the Halifax waterfront, said he was driving home a friend who had had too much to drink when they came upon the accident.

“My instinct was to take pictures of him so there would be some kind of a way to be able to identify this person later,” Mr. Gamble said.

The fall session of the legislature had wrapped up earlier that night and many MLAs had gone to a local bar afterward.

“The place was full of MLAs,” one source said.

Repeated attempts to contact Mr. Fage, 53, late Thursday afternoon and evening were unsuccessful. The minister told CBC-TV on Thursday: “I’ve reported the incident to the police.”

Joe Gillis, the premier’s spokesman, said earlier Thursday that Mr. Fage told the premier about the crash before Christmas.

"Mr. Fage told him there was a minor accident and that it was reported to the police as well as the insurance," Mr. Gillis said.

When asked if the minister told Mr. MacDonald he had left the scene of the accident, Mr. Gillis said no.

"But the premier had no reason to think otherwise or think anything else but what the minister had told him," he said.

Earlier Thursday, the premier told reporters the crash was minor and proper procedures were followed in reporting it to police.

Const. Jeff Carr of Halifax Regional Police confirmed that the force's accident investigation section is looking into the collision but he wouldn't say if Mr. Fage is involved.

"We're presently investigating a motor vehicle collision that occurred just after midnight on Nov. 24 where one of the vehicles involved did not remain at the scene of the accident," Const. Carr said. "We're investigating the circumstances surrounding the accident and also the circumstances surrounding the fact that one of the drivers did not remain at the scene."

Const. Carr said officers have since spoken with the driver who did not stay at the scene.

He said no charges have been laid and he would not say if police had received any pictures or video from any witnesses.

"I wouldn't be able to say that," he said. "That would be evidence. I can't talk about the evidence."

Police told CBC-TV that the driver came to them about the collision on Dec. 1, a week after it happened.

In February, Mr. Fage resigned his cabinet spot over a government loan. He hadn't told his cabinet colleagues about his ties to S&J Potato, a company slated to receive a \$250,000 government loan. Mr. MacDonald put Mr. Fage back into cabinet after the June election.

NDP House Leader Kevin Deveau said the fact Mr. Fage is embroiled in a second controversy reflects badly on the premier and his judgment.

"The premier should have thought long and hard before he decided to bring him back into cabinet," the New Democrat said. "I think Nova Scotians have good reason to question (Mr. MacDonald's) judgment."

Liberal House Leader Manning MacDonald said Mr. Fage is doing the right thing until the matter is cleared up.

"Without knowing details of why he is resigning, or whether he is resigning on his own or the premier's asked him for it, it's not an easy time for him," the Grit said.

With Dan Arsenault, staff reporter