

Should B.C. police itself?

Wallace Gilby Craig

North Shore News

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

MY Jan. 9 column, Time to Decide on Policing, triggered an unexpected invitation to attend a day-long forum on the creation of a regional police service for Metro Vancouver.

Organized by Professor Robert Gordon, director of the school of criminology at Simon Fraser University, this public discussion set for Feb. 6 at the Wosk Centre in Vancouver on regional policing has attracted a blue-ribbon mix of speakers and panellists including West Van's Chief Const. Kash Heed and the RCMP's Gary Bass, deputy commissioner, E Division.

I will be very interested in what Heed and Bass have to say about the future of policing on the North Shore.

Solicitor General John Les is to open the forum; Attorney General Wallace Oppal will speak at closing.

Gordon says the forum will be of particular interest to police managers, serving police officers, mayors, municipal councillors, administrators, provincial and federal politicians, and other key policy makers involved in policing issues.

I hope attendees will be given ample opportunity to query panellists and speakers when any need for clarification arises. One question that comes to mind: Why are British Columbia's 11 independent police departments governed by police boards controlled by a majority of persons appointed by our solicitor general? It is an unacceptable and undemocratic process. It was rejected in 1994 by then inquiry-commissioner Wallace Oppal who recommended that municipal councillors be given control of the appointment process and that it be a public and open process. Oppal also recommended that mayors be limited to an ex officio presence at police board meetings.

In municipalities served by RCMP detachments an even greater anachronism exists: as national police officers they are outside the scope of the Police Act of B.C. That rules out governance by police board. And most difficult for me to accept: the attorney general, the chief law officer of the Crown in the right of our province, has no actual control over RCMP detachments.

For almost 60 years we have meekly relied on Ottawa for policing in most of our municipalities. We absurdly cling to the belief that a no-control contract with the RCMP is a money-saver and at the same time complain about property crime and violence. I expect there may be willingness among attendees at the Feb. 6 forum on regional policing to speak forthrightly about the fact that our province seems incapable of policing itself.

However, any real discussion on police board governance will likely be swept aside by the main debate over the efficacy of Greater Vancouver regional policing in place of a moribund status quo that can do no more than primp itself up with integrated task forces of RCMP members and municipal police officers.

Attorney General Oppal may have pangs of embarrassment as he rises to speak at the end of this gathering of movers and shakers. Think about it: Fourteen years ago commissioner Oppal penned a remarkable 20-page letter of transmittal and delivered it, with his report Closing the Gap, to then attorney general Colin Gabelmann.

Oppal's recommendations dealt mainly with governance, public complaints, discipline and community-based policing. He recognized that the last major structural change in policing was in 1950 when the province contracted with the RCMP to replace the B.C. Provincial Police.

In his letter of transmittal Oppal said: "The subject of governance may be the most important issue examined by this Inquiry. . . .

"The role of a (police) board is very important in the governance of police. The board is the employer of the police and collectively represents the community at large. Perhaps the most critical function it performs relates to the hiring of a police chief. Yet board members receive very little guidance and assistance in the performance of this task.

"Police boards must be aware of their community's needs and priorities in the areas of public safety and policing. They should and must hold the police chief accountable for policing in their communities. They must critically assess the performance of both the chief constable and the department. This is seldom done."

At the end of the transmittal letter a quite forceful Oppal said "The RCMP must make fundamental changes and be more responsive . . . more accountable. . . ." He went on to make it very clear that ". . . in the event that the RCMP is not prepared to undergo the necessary change that is suggested in this report, it will be imperative for the province to consider establishing its own provincial police force. . . ."

Oppal then laid some hickory on local politicians: ". . . it is disconcerting that our cities and municipalities policed by the RCMP have no power to select their chief constables. It is even more disconcerting that there is little apparent concern in those communities. There appears to be no concern amongst municipal politicians that there are no police committees under the Police Act in RCMP areas."

Since 1994, succeeding B.C. governments have done nothing to reform policing. Closing the Gap should be re-issued in 2008 with a new title, Failure to Close the Gap, and heads should roll.

Let's keep it very simple, the magnitude of gang crime in Metro Vancouver with its senseless and seemingly never-ending internecine murders is reason enough to create a regional police service in Greater Vancouver.

Regional policing requires an active and purposeful police board. Membership on the board should be by election. Regional policing with citizen governance would bring police and public closer together on all aspects of management with one exception: absolute independence of a chief constable in commanding and giving orders to his force.

But the first step ought to be taken on the North Shore. Let 2008 be a year in which our three municipalities decide to implement regional municipal policing with a tripartite elected police board. With strength of purpose it can be done and will be an exemplar for others to follow.

Your choice is limited: lead, follow or watch television.

Contact Judicial Gadfly at wallace-gilby-craig@shaw.ca or by posting your comment directly on the Writer's Corner of www.realjustice.ca.

© North Shore News 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.