

THE CASE FOR THE CREATION OF A METRO VANCOUVER POLICE SERVICE

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INTRODUCTION

When we refer to a Metro Vancouver Police Service we are referring to a single police organization responsible for policing the whole Metro Vancouver area that will replace the current patchwork of municipal departments and R.C.M.P. detachments.

We favour the amalgamation of police departments, the Greater Vancouver Transit Authority Police Service, and the RCMP detachments currently providing municipal police services on contract in Metro Vancouver into one organization. This is often referred to as “regionalization” although the term has become misleading. Regionalization of a sort already exists by virtue of regionally shared resources such as E-Comm and the Police Academy, and integrated teams that address specific forms of crime (e.g., the Integrated Homicide Investigation Team) on a reactive, rather than proactive, basis. We are arguing for much more than this. In provinces such as Ontario, regionalization has meant the amalgamation of police services into one organization and this is what we are seeking for Metro Vancouver.

Metro Vancouver is the last large metropolitan area in Canada to not be policed by a single police service. Metro Victoria is also not policed in this way and the need for amalgamation is equally critical in the Capital Region.

It is significant that when most people, even those advocating the status quo, are asked whether, if they were to start a policing system for Metro Vancouver tomorrow, they would chose the current organizational model, they invariably say, “no.” Some say “no” more emphatically than others but no one seems to be able to make a compelling argument in favour of starting out, or continuing, with our current system. When pressed further, most agree that the current organization of policing makes no sense but that it is hard to change because of “political” opposition.

Unfortunately, the issue of amalgamation is tainted with political considerations rather than a rational, best practice determination of what is best for the residents of Metro Vancouver. In this regard, three points need to be made.

(i) There are obstacles at the municipal level where any kind of change tends to be opposed by the majority of mayors, usually for self-serving reasons. The exception is the City of Vancouver which favours amalgamation.

(ii) The Provincial Government, which has responsibility for policing in the Province and the overarching responsibility for ensuring that British Columbians benefit from the best possible system of policing, is reluctant to proceed with amalgamation without the agreement of the region’s mayors; something that is unlikely. Successive Solicitors-General who, by statute, have the responsibility for policing in the province have stated “we will do it if the mayors ask us to do it” knowing full well that such a unified request will never come.

(iii) The Royal Canadian Mounted Police are the third political force, even though they should not be influencing decision-making at any political level. The R.C.M.P. have a great deal at stake in British Columbia both financially and in terms of the prestige associated with being a major player at the federal, provincial and municipal levels of policing. They also have Imperial designs. They are in favour of amalgamation but only if the amalgamation involves RCMP domination of all policing in the Province.

The current organization of policing in B.C. can be traced to the disbanding of the B.C. Provincial Police in 1950 and the introduction of RCMP contract policing to meet the policing needs of both the province and many municipalities. It goes without saying that what was appropriate in 1950, when Burnaby and Surrey were semi rural areas, is unlikely to be appropriate now. A lot has changed in the last half century but a 1950s approach to the organization of policing remains.

The issue of creating a single police service for Metro Vancouver has been discussed on and off for at least the last 20 years but there has never been a full public airing of the pros and cons, or an independent review focused solely on the issue. There have been lots of internal (provincial) reports on the topic, including aspects of the report of the Oppal Commission on Policing in 1994 and a report for the Police Services Branch by Woods & Rippon in 2000. In each case, though, very little has been accomplished. The tendency is for provincial and municipal politicians and policy-makers to shy away from what needs to be done and it is clear that their failure to move on the issue is more about political self-preservation and timing than about what is best for the citizens of Metro Vancouver.

WHY CREATE A METRO VANCOUVER POLICE SERVICE?

1) Metro Vancouver is a REGION not a collection of towns and villages separated by orchards and fields. Municipalities are fused together by urban growth. There is a massive movement of populations *across* the Metro Vancouver area on a daily basis, primarily for work and recreation purposes. This movement involves more than simply a flow into the centre of Vancouver. New urban centres containing office, retail and recreational facilities have been and are being created around the region including Metrotown, the Coquitlam Centre, and Surrey Central. These centres contain and attract populations in their own right.

The police related problems of the Metro Vancouver area are largely regional problems, not purely local, municipal problems and are best dealt with by a police service that works across the whole area in a coordinated way. This, of course, is the policing model that operates in every other large Canadian city.

It should be noted that a large number of services in Metro Vancouver are already regionalized; most notably water and sewer services. We have one regional transit system. It is clear that the importance of coordinated regional services is well recognized in some key areas, but for some reason this has not extended to public safety issues.

2) There is significant public support for having a single Metro Vancouver Police Service and support amongst police officers in the field.

An Angus Reid Poll conducted in early November 2007 indicated 70 percent support for a single Metro police service amongst those surveyed in Vancouver, and 63 percent support amongst those in the rest of the region.

Significant public support exists even though there has not been a public debate on the creation of a Metro police service. While the media have reported and commented favourably on the issue, it has simply not appeared on the agenda of political bodies until fairly recently, and certainly not before the November 2007 poll.

Equally importantly, there is evidence that serving police officers support the idea of amalgamation. Certainly, the support is not found amongst many senior police officers, both municipal and RCMP, who have a major stake in the status quo, but those in the field who daily wrestle with the problems associated with a Balkanized policing system have indicated they are in favour.

3) The current system of localized (municipal) policing, coupled with overarching integrated teams focused on specific areas of policing (e.g., homicide investigation) does not work well.

This system was set up several years ago in an attempt to achieve a regionalization of police services but without disturbing the local political structures underpinning policing in Metro Vancouver. It was set up because the prevailing patchwork of police services was seen to be inefficient and ineffective by provincial politicians, police administrators, managers and policymakers, but no one was willing and able to do what needed to be done: create a single police service for the Metro area.

The integrated teams approach has never been evaluated, but there are indications that it does not work very well. The following problems have been identified by both police managers and individuals working in integrated teams:

- integrated units drain resources (via secondments) from municipal police services which reduces the capacity of these services to meet local policing needs;

- individual municipalities bear the cost of training and developing police officers only to have them work outside the communities that are paying for them;
- integrated units compete amongst themselves for scarce resources and often disagree over priorities;
- not all police chiefs are supportive of all aspects of integration which they see as simply leading to more RCMP domination of policing in the region;
- the commitment to integrated units is patchy because of the demands of local policing - if there is nothing to gain locally, police chiefs are not participating;
- the current trend to integrated units as supported by the Solicitor-General is a strong indication and, indeed, proof that amalgamation is the way forward to increased efficiency;
- while there is a system of intelligence-related communication between units, the degree of coordination leaves a lot to be desired (they continue to work in silos). In particular, there are differing policies and practices associated with the collection and dissemination of criminal intelligence.
- integrated units are managed by joint management teams but these teams are cumbersome and bureaucratic – there is inconsistency in the management methods, investigative techniques and technologies used by many integrated units;
- the members of the units are drawn from different municipal departments and RCMP detachments and are frequently operating with different policies and procedures as well as different forms of civilian oversight.

4) Greater efficiencies and better organizational structures will result from the creation of a single MVPS.

These improvements *include* the following:

- Economies of scale. There would, for example, be fewer administrators and a related reduction in the administrative apparatus; a single recruiting system; standardized training programmes and a single, larger equipment and supply purchasing strategy.
- Enhanced career and promotion opportunities and increased morale and professionalism all of which improves efficiency, aids high quality recruitment, and facilitates transfers into the police service from elsewhere, both within Canada and from traditional recruiting places such as Britain. Recruitment is one of the most critical issues facing policing in Canada today. All the large agencies including the RCMP are struggling to meet their personnel demands. Other police agencies are recruiting in other Commonwealth countries such as Britain and Australia. In addition, Australia is recruiting from Canada. Clearly, there is a Western world market for quality recruits and a large, single police service in Metro

Vancouver would be extremely attractive to many potential recruits both national and international.

- Better personnel management systems; for example, individuals will not be promoted from the ranks to supervise their friends as is currently the case in small police departments; and the disposition of discipline cases can include moving errant personnel to other police districts within the Metro area so they do not continue to police in an area where they had experienced difficulties.
- Standardized policies and procedures, including the public complaints procedure which is currently affected by the statute that governs the offending police officer. Municipal officers are governed by provincial legislation; RCMP members by federal legislation. Since, the RCMP would continue to be involved in provincial policing they could be the body that investigates complaints against MVPS officers, while MVPS personnel could investigate complaints against the RCMP. This would go some way towards resolving one of the major concerns associated with our current police complaints system: police investigating themselves without an appropriate level of independence.
- Modern policing has seen a widespread commitment to the ideals of Intelligence-led policing such that many post secondary institutions have created academic and technical programs to meet the demand for crime analysts. The principles of intelligence-led policing allow for the production of up to the minute accurate analyses of crime trends and the subsequent timely deployment of police resources to combat and reduce crime. This proven and effective policing strategy cannot be applied on a regional basis within the current policing structure in Metro Vancouver because of different policies and procedures.
- MVPS personnel would be subject to a single, governing, provincial statute with oversight being provided by the provincial Attorney-General. Currently, policing in the Metro Vancouver area is subject to two governing statutes and the RCMP is still controlled from Ottawa.
- The ability to deal more efficiently with cross-Metro (i.e., regional) issues and problems including better synchronized responses. Proactive approaches will also be easier to organize and implement.

5) The RCMP is a major player in the delivery of municipal police services in the Metro Vancouver area. They are responsible for contract policing in large municipalities such as Surrey and Richmond and are not eager to relinquish the role. In some cases, the RCMP is an island of red in a sea of blue

(e.g., in Richmond). In other cases, such as New Westminster, a municipal police service is an island of blue in a sea of red.

The RCMP contract expires in 2012. Negotiations to renew the contract have started. Arguably, negotiations affecting *municipal* policing in the province should cease until the issue of how best to police the large urban areas is thoroughly discussed and resolved. The RCMP is probably best equipped to continue with provincial policing at this time, in addition to its federal policing function.

The future role of the RCMP in policing in Canada is unclear. Both the Brown Report and Commissioner William Elliott's statements from December 2007 suggest that significant but unstated changes will occur over the next few years. It is not clear what the implications will be; notably, whether the RCMP will focus solely upon federal and territorial policing; whether they will also continue with provincial policing; or whether they will withdraw from municipal policing. The Province of Alberta is apparently already considering the creation of a provincial police service rather than renewing its contract with the RCMP.

A significant incentive for municipalities to continue with RCMP contract policing is the so-called "10 percent subsidy." Municipalities that use the RCMP currently pay only 90 percent of the true policing costs; the rest is borne by the Federal Government. The extent to which this will continue remains unclear. Regardless, there are concerns that even if the subsidy is paid the detachments run perpetually under strength such that the municipalities only receive 90 percent of the policing they should receive.

6) At least three municipalities in Metro Vancouver are currently reviewing, or have reviewed, the way in which their policing needs are been met and especially whether they wish to continue with a contract with the RCMP. The City of Richmond has received a report from a firm of consultants, Perivale and Taylor. North Vancouver has received a review report from the same set of consultants. The issue for North Vancouver is whether the policing needs of the entire North Shore would be better served by a single North Shore Police Service that includes West Vancouver.

Obviously, questions are being asked about the value of RCMP contract policing, and rightly so.

Significantly, the Vancouver Police Department has recently completed a study that favours the creation of a single police service for the whole of Metro Vancouver. The report is publicly available on the VPD website. Both the Mayor of Vancouver, Gregor Robertson, and Chief Constable Jim Chu have spoken in favour of a single Metro police service.

WHAT ARE THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE CREATION OF A METRO VANCOUVER POLICE SERVICE?

The opponents of a single Metro Vancouver Police Service usually make a series of largely unsubstantiated claims in support of their argument:

- *The creation of a regional police service will mean the end of community policing.*

This is simply not the case. As is common with other large police services, a Metro service would be divided into divisions or districts that reflect either local political boundaries or geographical peculiarities. Distinct communities will continue to have their distinctive policing needs met through community policing strategies at the same time recognizing that police have an overarching responsibility to protect life and property.

- *There will be a loss of service to the suburbs as all the policing resources drain to the core of the Metro area.*

This is an incorrect claim for two reasons. Firstly, the Metro Vancouver area now contains multiple business/retail and recreation centres (e.g., Metrotown and Coquitlam Centre) rather than just one (the Downtown Vancouver area) and the trend is toward more suburban centres of this kind. Police resources will be deployed accordingly. Secondly, even though there will likely be a redistribution of personnel according to need across the Metro area it is invariably the case that more experienced, and therefore more efficient, police officers voluntarily shift to the suburban areas once they gather experience in the cores, and carry the expertise with them. Areas away from the regional cores benefit. In addition, police officers would be deployed across the region in a way that ensures the best use of their individual skill sets.

- *There is a loss of local control and local accountability.*

Again, this is not the case. While the governance and accountability structures change in favour of greater efficiencies, local input into community needs and priorities continues through advisory committees and similar structures.

- *A Metro service will still have boundary lines; where do you draw the line, at the Alberta border?*

This is a spurious argument. Metropolitan areas usually have naturally arising boundaries at the point where fields and trees and rocks meet suburban growth. And the boundaries expand, over time, to delineate the edges of a “city”. The police service boundaries can change accordingly.

- *It will cost too much to start a new police service, the transition process is too complicated, and there are no operational savings to be derived from a single police service.*

There are initial, one time start up costs that will require federal/provincial assistance. Transitions are complicated but there are numerous examples of amalgamation and regionalization to call upon. There is no hard evidence that a single police service is cheaper to run (opinions vary but tend to favour savings) but it will not cost more and taxpayers are generally getting better value for their policing dollars. Crime free communities clearly cost money to create and maintain but taxpayers rarely oppose better protection and safer streets.

A CLOSING COMMENT

The Vancouver Police Department's 2008 report (available on the VPD website) on the issues surrounding the regionalization of police services in Metro Vancouver is an extremely valuable discussion of the need for, and direction of, change. The closing paragraph of that report captures the next step rather nicely.

"It is important that any deliberations on altering the status quo for police service delivery...consider the unique needs of each community in the region and that communities have a voice in any new structure that is developed. The fact that there are numerous competing interests and stakeholders ...necessitates that any discussions of regionalizing police services will require the leadership and direction of the provincial government, along with the cooperation and willingness of municipal governments to participate. Providing the best possible policing service in the interests of public safety must be the overarching driver for future discussions."

And it is a meaningful discussion that is the next step; preferably a discussion initiated by the Provincial Government in the form of an *independent* review, chaired by an individual of unquestionable integrity, into the need for a single Metro Vancouver Police Service.

There are many local police experts, serving police officers, and strong public opinion in support of the concept of a single Metro Vancouver Police Service and for these reasons the Provincial Government should order a review before a new contract with the RCMP is signed. Continued delay will only make the inevitable more costly.