

Robert J. (Bob) Stewart

# Timing is Critical: Regional Police 2012



**O**ne way to address the pressing challenges of crime in Metro Vancouver is to create a regional and coordinated police force to replace our 16 separate units.

Much has been said about the need to reorganize the police forces of British Columbia. The topic has been studied repeatedly over several decades, by well-respected professionals, sometimes at great cost.

Local municipal leaders seem to resist the concept of a unified force. Perhaps they are concerned about losing autonomy to Vancouver, but they must remember that a local RCMP commander is ultimately responsible only to Ottawa.

The provincial government has the responsibility for policing British Columbia. That can be delegated by virtue of the *Police Act*, under which a city or municipality has the option of forming its own police department or contracting-out this service. Regardless of how an area is policed, the provincial government retains the responsibility for the level of service being delivered and the standards of performance.

The Province of BC has not directly governed or managed a police force since 1950, when the BC Provincial Police Force was

disbanded and the RCMP contracted. Most provincial police officers began wearing RCMP uniforms.

With respect to the 11 independent police services within BC, a Police Board made up of appointed citizens provides civilian oversight and is responsible for the governance of the force. The Chief is the manager accountable to the Board for all non-policing matters.

## Local municipal leaders seem to resist the concept of a unified force.

The contracted force in BC remains the RCMP, the national force governed by the *RCMP Act*, reporting exclusively to the federal minister responsible, with no civilian oversight.

It must be emphasized that the history, culture, and training of the RCMP is focused on national policing, from wilderness areas to the most sophisticated of international crime—money laundering, smuggling, terrorism, and drugs. There is no “big city” or metropolitan experience within the RCMP heritage; urban policing is not part of their training regimen. Local mayors and councils with an RCMP contract in place usually have a committee that liaises with the local commander on specific issues limited to their backyard.

## An Extraordinary Advantage to Criminal Organizations

Variances from municipality to municipality in police services— independent and contracted—within one urban area has created an extraordinary advantage for criminal organizations.

As a result of serious past communications issues, and with efforts increasing to impede regional policing, governments have formed “integrated units” for serious crimes such as homicide. This solution does no more than prove the thesis of regional policing and showcase the obvious reality of a criminal element that ignores geographical or operational boundaries.

Examples of the failure of these integrated units abound. A case in the headlines in 2008 was the acquittal of an alleged kingpin of a biker gang. The police officer who directed the investigation said afterward that communications failures between the RCMP and municipal forces led to multiple mistakes.

- Complaints against municipal police officers in BC are governed by the *Police Act* and the Office of the Police Complaints Commissioner.
- There is no legal authority for BC to deal with complaints against the RCMP, despite the fact that

over 30 percent of the national force is employed in this province. All complaints ultimately lead to Ottawa and the RCMP's self-managed complaints procedure.

The integrated units are currently staffed by members of both the independent and the contracted police services. As individuals, the officers are subject to differing policy directives and oversight procedures. The integrated policing units were formed in response to cross-jurisdiction crime problems—they are reactive units.

Among the most vexing and time-consuming issues afflicting police manpower today are social concerns, such as street people and the mentally impaired, who wander from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Regional Information-sharing and the coordination of social services are virtually nonexistent.

When provincial authorities and municipal officials defend the RCMP contract, they are quick to cite a "subsidy," implying they are saving money by contracting federally. If there is a subsidy, it is coming out of our federal taxes.

### **The RCMP "Subsidy"**

The "subsidy" does not stand up to scrutiny. The RCMP contracts to provide a municipality a certain number of officers. An independent audit of municipalities would invariably determine that, at any given moment, rarely more than two thirds of the total are available for duty. Some members are on courses—French language courses are a big draw, even though French is less relevant in BC than many other languages. Some are seconded to other duties; on leave; taking time off in lieu of overtime, and on banked holidays. Some positions are unfilled.

RCMP detachments can move manpower for major events or specific projects among their contracted jurisdictions, but Metro Vancouver's system of 6 separate forces makes it impossible to take a regional view. If a specific type of crime is plaguing a given neighbourhood, it should be possible to temporarily move extra personnel from a quieter zone to deal with a short-term problem.

When there are major events such as the annual fireworks extravaganza, sports events, or ethnic festivals, we should be able to assign police to follow the crowds. If 500,000 people assemble in one location, that is 500,000 fewer for police to worry about in their home communities.

The police also have a responsibility to protect life and property and prevent crime. A unified police service would ensure that all aspects of policing would be included.

### **The opportunity to fix the problem is here now.**

The opportunity to fix the problem is here now. The current policing contract with Ottawa is due for renewal in 2012. A reliable source advises negotiations are taking place to retain the status quo for another 20 years.

The problem lies in the minds of many politicians whose standard response is "the current system is cheaper" or simply, "we like it."

A few seem to believe their local crime prevention program would disappear in any new arrangement. Not likely. There would be no need for wholesale movement of personnel. Good management would keep people in the areas they know best. Very few RCMP officers would want to leave this province for any reason.

If we had the opportunity to design a police service-delivery model from scratch, we would not divide Metro Vancouver into a patchwork of 5 independent forces and 11 contracted detachments—16 branch offices without a head office and no overall game plan, budget, or resource development—including recruiting and training.

A few areas that should be mandatory in any police service agency are

- long-range strategic planning,
- a common service-delivery model,
- a public accountability process—including civilian complaint oversight.

The opportunity for the young people of British Columbia to seek

careers in policing in their home areas would be another major benefit.

I suggest there is an appetite now for doing it right. This means setting up metro and regional policing areas across the province as determined by geography, population, access, criminal activity, and any other criteria that make good sense. There still would be a role for a provincial police unit responsible for the areas not appropriate for a metro or regional policing structure. I can think of no service model that would do that better than the RCMP.

I encourage the RCMP to concentrate more determinedly on what it does best—federal law, terrorism, drugs, smuggling, financial crime, and global threats—the big picture—and attain for Canada more value from the limited resources available.

British Columbia has only to look eastward to see it is odd-province-out when it comes to reorganizing police services in the interest of the best use of a very important resource, our police officers. ▲

**R. J. Stewart**, a Vancouver police officer for 37 years and Chief Constable from 1981 to 1991, has been a director of national and international justice agencies and instrumental in the evolution of BC's Coordinated Law Enforcement Unit, various Police Commissions, Crime Stoppers, and other agencies. He conceptualized the respected Justice Institute of British Columbia, became its founding Chair in 1978, and continued to pilot the JI's development for 17 years.

A member of the National Parole Board from 1996 until 2005, Bob became founding chair in 2004 of the Motor Vehicle Sales Authority of BC (formerly known as the Dealer Council), the independent regulatory authority that supervises the retail sales of motor vehicles in BC. He continues in that capacity today.

His many charitable pursuits include President of Variety — The Children's Charity. Bob received an Honourary Doctor of Laws degree from the Justice Institute in June 2008.