

Times Colonist (Victoria)

B.C. is the only province to shun regional forces; Trend seen in many countries: 'Are they all wrong?' former chief asks

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Page: A1 / Front

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Byline: Katie DeRosa, Lindsay Kines and Jack Knox

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Illustrations: Graphic/Diagram: Times Colonist / Greater Victoria has seven separate forces, with municipal police forces in Victoria-Esquimalt, Saanich, Oak Bay and Central Saanich, and RCMP detachments in West Shore, Sidney-North Saanich and Sooke.; Colour Photo: Postmedia News / OTTAWA POLICE CHIEF VERN WHITE: "A better model."; Colour Photo: Postmedia News / TORONTO POLICE CHIEF BILL BLAIR: "I still have neighbourhood cops."; Graphic/Diagram: Headlines from the Times Colonist files show some of the failed attempts made toward regional policing.

PATCHWORK POLICING: SECOND OF FOUR PARTS

After decades of jurisdictional squabbling, and three deadly tragedies, is it time to overhaul B.C.'s fractured police system?

In the second instalment of a four-part series, Times Colonist reporters

Katie DeRosa, Lindsay Kines and Jack Knox examine the current patchwork system that sees seven police forces in the capital region, and explore whether B.C. should establish regional forces.

YESTERDAY: In three chilling cases -- Clifford Olson, Robert Pickton and Peter Lee -- B.C.'s fractured policing system has been put under the microscope.

TODAY: Greater Victoria is served by four municipal departments, three RCMP detachments, and more than a dozen integrated police units. That's in stark contrast to most big Canadian cities, which have just one force. Are they all wrong?

TOMORROW: Despite serving as a hunting ground for two of Canada's worst serial killers, B.C. has failed to put systems in place to help police catch mobile predators.

SATURDAY: Politics has played a key role in discussions about police regionalization for almost 100 years. Is there now a desire to move forward? And, if so, what would a regionalized force look like?

- Follow the series on our website. See the stories, plus an interactive map and photo gallery at timescolonist.com

In every major city in every other province, there is one dominant police force.

Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Regina, Winnipeg, Hamilton, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Halifax -- even regions in Ontario, such as Niagara, Kitchener-Waterloo and Peel.

Greater Victoria and Greater Vancouver remain the lone holdouts in Canada, locked in a jumbled

patchwork of municipal departments, RCMP detachments and specialized integrated units.

"You have to ask the question: 'Are the rest of them wrong?' " says Bob Stewart, a retired Vancouver police chief who has been pushing for regionalized police in B.C. for years.

Since 1957 -- beginning with the 13 municipalities that made up Metropolitan Toronto -- most Canadian cities that weren't already served by one force have been moving toward regionalization, putting hundreds of officers and specialized units in one department.

The trend continues around the world. There are just 43 police forces in Britain, and a radical reform of policing could slim those down to as few as 10. Australia has just seven state police forces and one federal force.

B.C. is the only Canadian province to not follow suit.

The Lower Mainland has at least 15 RCMP and municipal police jurisdictions delivering services to two million people, while Greater Victoria has seven RCMP and municipal police jurisdictions serving just 350,000 people.

Robert Gordon, head of the criminology department at Simon Fraser University, and co-author with Stewart of a 2009 paper called "The Case for the Creation of a Metro Vancouver Police Service," argues the trend is there for a reason.

Simply put, he says, regionalized policing is effective.

"There's no shortage of models of what it would look like. We know exactly what it would look like and how to set it up," he says. "This stuff has been put in place in other jurisdictions a long, long time ago and it works."

Ontario's experience with regionalization probably offers the best comparison with B.C., unlike provinces such as Alberta and Saskatchewan, whose major cities have always been policed by one force.

Since the 1970s, Ontario has managed to whittle down 120 municipal departments to 58.

Most of the changes were forced by the provincial government, either by mandating amalgamation or by setting adequacy standards for police forces. Those standards, brought about in 2001, required every police department, no matter how small, to provide a certain level of service to its community -- for example having a tactical team or dog unit -- which many couldn't do unless they were folded into a larger department.

"There was a strong push to ensure that all municipalities receive adequate and effective policing services," says Toronto police Chief Bill Blair, who oversees a department of 5,600 officers serving 2.6 million people. "It established a high standard to what everyone should be entitled."

And if you ask Blair or Ottawa police Chief Vern White, the single regionalized forces are more efficient and more competent.

Instead of several chiefs, administrative services and headquarters, all operations are consolidated under one roof. All areas of the region also have equal access to expensive specialized resources such as homicide and organized crime investigators, and forensics and tactical units.

"By integrating a number of smaller police forces we are able to provide those services in an economical way for the entire city," says White, who heads a department of 1,371 officers for a population of nearly 900,000, which grew out of a merger of three Ottawa-area forces in 1995.

White says that's because he has more officers, cars and units at any given time, he has more options: If there is a brawl at the university downtown, a missing child in the suburbs, or a gun call on the outskirts of town, he can shift more officers -- and in

particular, more highly trained ones, not just whoever is on duty -- to deal with the situation. When the issue dies down, the officers return to their assigned patrol areas.

White is not blind to the power struggles, logistical challenges, hard sell to the public and set-up costs of creating a regional force.

News reports indicate the forced amalgamation by the Ontario government did not sit well with the two suburban police forces or their municipal councils, and there were some interesting politics at work. At least two of the forces -- Ottawa and Nepean -- took the opportunity to promote several of their officers to higher ranks before the merger to ensure they'd get better roles in the new department.

The merger ended up costing \$2.4 million, which was picked up by the Ontario government, and there were significant problems with officer morale in the first few years.

Yet White argues it was worth that pain.

"Yeah, sure there was blood in the room in the

beginning. Not all the unions agreed, not all the municipalities agreed but I don't think anyone would argue now it's not a better model."

While there is a common fear from suburban citizens that regionalizing the police will result in them forfeiting their officers to urban hot spots, both chiefs say that hasn't been the case.

Even in the most populated city in Canada, Blair waves off claims that a large police force eschews community policing.

"I still have neighbourhood cops," he says, referring to the officer who knows the local community, the school kids and business owners. "They have that personal connection with people. That's a very important part of how we deliver policing services."

In Ottawa, White removed division commanders to prevent officers in each geographic area from working in silos. He now has inspectors who lead operations such as traffic or drug crimes and constantly talk across the division offices.

Blair acknowledges that while the Ontario experience is a good lesson for B.C., he notes it could be more difficult here given the RCMP's involvement in policing smaller municipalities across B.C. (In Ontario, rural areas are policed by the Ontario Provincial Police.)

RCMP officers aren't subject to discipline under B.C.'s Police Act or the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner. The force is governed by the RCMP Act and, unlike municipal police, its officers are not unionized.

Those issues have been highlighted in Nova Scotia, where a hybrid model of municipal police and the RCMP was created in 2003 when the Halifax Regional Police joined forces with the Mounties who were policing the outlying rural suburban areas. The Halifax Regional Police itself was less than 10 years old, having been formed in 1996 when the municipalities of Halifax, Dartmouth and Bedford merged.

The model has "had its challenges," said Russell Walker, a city councillor and chairman of the Halifax board of police commissioners.

The 470 municipal officers and 178 RCMP officers operate out of the same headquarters but wear different uniforms, drive different police cruisers and report to different bosses.

Decisions are made by two leaders; a police chief and a RCMP superintendent. While the municipal police and Mounties patrol different areas, they collaborate on major crime investigations.

After a three-year study by consultants Perivale and Taylor, the city's police commissioners recommended ditching the RCMP in favour of a regional force for the entire Halifax area and its 410,000 citizens.

City council ignored the recommendation, even though the report said it could have saved \$28 million over three years, and opted to maintain the status quo.

"It seemed to come out we were going to keep the RCMP at no matter what cost," Walker says, which he chalks up to a mindset resisting of change.

kderosa@tc.canwest.com

lkines@tc.canwest.com

jknox@tc.canwest.com

A HISTORY OF DIVISIVE POLITICS THWARTS BIDS TO MERGE FORCES: INTEGRATION STUDIED IN 1926, 1946, 1978, 1985, 1990 AND 2000

Ten years ago this month, the mayors of five municipalities -- Victoria, Saanich, Central Saanich, Esquimalt and Oak Bay -- got together and proposed the integration of their police forces.

Not amalgamation, they hastened to add. Integration. Amalgamation Lite. They were talking about working together on dog teams, dive units and other specialized functions.

It was a pre-emptive strike; the mayors thought if they could show their forces to be co-operating effectively, a frustrated provincial government wouldn't force them into a shotgun wedding, forcing a regional department at gunpoint.

As if to illustrate the need to break down artificial barriers, on the very day the five mayors were pressing their police boards, a brief communication hiccup saw Victoria police race to the Mayfair Mall parking lot for a guys-with-guns call that turned out to be a Saanich drug bust that had drifted across the municipal border.

The integration proposal didn't include the three RCMP detachments -- Sooke, West Shore, Sidney/North Saanich -- that police the capital region's eight other municipalities. Politics is the art of the possible, and the complications involved in divorcing the region's Mounties from the rest of the RCMP and marrying them to the municipal forces seemed too daunting to contemplate.

Yet even the modest integration effort stalled, the meetings descending into what sources at the time called "giant pissing matches," bogged down by such minutiae as who would pay for the canine squad's dog food.

That prompted the solicitor general, ex-Mountie Rich Coleman, to threaten forced integration, if not outright amalgamation. In 2003, responding to a letter from B.C.'s fed-up top police bureaucrat, Kevin Begg, Coleman ordered the capital region's police departments, bureaucrats and politicians to form a committee to bring about change.

"We know by the Oppal report that integration and amalgamation of police services are essential," Coleman told the legislature that year, referring to Vancouver judge Wally Oppal's authoritative 1994 study of policing in B.C.

Coleman made noises about forcing Victoria-area forces to combine in every area except patrol and community policing.

The province, backed by the police chiefs, mayors and police unions of Victoria and Esquimalt, did merge those two municipalities' forces on Jan. 1, 2003. That same year, police unions in Victoria, Oak Bay and Central Saanich -- but not Saanich -- called for a merger of departments. A poll commissioned by the Times Colonist and CHEK found 70 per cent of Greater Victoria residents favoured full police amalgamation.

The idea was favoured by a majority in every municipality, from lowest to highest: Oak Bay 54 per cent; Metchosin 57 per cent; Saanich 64 per cent; Sidney 68 per cent; Central Saanich, Langford and Sooke 73 per cent; View Royal 74 per cent; Esquimalt 75 per cent; Colwood 76 per cent; Victoria 77 per cent; North Saanich 78 per cent; Highlands 80 per cent.

But Coleman took his foot off the gas after local Liberal MLAs -- with the notable exception of former Esquimalt cop Arnie Hamilton -- balked, arguing amalgamation would bleed their suburban constituencies of resources diverted to downtown Victoria. Without Coleman waving the big stick as incentive, the committee driving the integration effort lost momentum.

The political landscape seemed to shift when the 2005 provincial election saw the defeat of Liberals Susan Brice in Saanich South and Sheila Orr in Victoria-Hillside -- both opponents of amalgamation -- and the election of Oppal, whom many expected to drive through the creation of regional forces in B.C. Yet it never came to pass.

There has been significant integration in recent years, though it's spotty in places.

An Islandwide major crime unit created in 2007 includes the Mounties and Victoria, but not Saanich, and by extension Oak Bay, as it contracts many services to Saanich.

A regional crime unit created in 2008 to target the capital's most prolific offenders suffered a blow when Victoria pulled out late last year. A regional domestic violence unit was launched this July.

Several local units provide specialized resources to the four municipal forces -- emergency response, crowd control, dive team -- while the Mounties have their own units.

Other regional units, part of provincewide initiatives, deal with traffic and organized crime.

But with the release of the LePard report last month into the investigation of serial killer Robert Pickton -- which said he might have been caught sooner were it not for "problems created by the multiple policing jurisdictions" -- the issue of regionalization reared its head yet again.

The issue isn't, however, something new -- it goes back more than 80 years in the capital region.

Indeed, on Sept. 18, 1926, the following letter was sent to the Oak Bay police commission: "I am directed by the board of police commissioners for the City of Victoria to advise that it has under consideration the proposed amalgamation of Victoria, Oak Bay, Saanich and Esquimalt police departments under a metropolitan police administration."

The idea went nowhere.

Ditto for a 1946 push for a metropolitan police force to reduce duplication of services.

In 1978, the B.C. Police Commission urged unification of the capital's five municipal forces.

A 1985 report called for the merger of the Victoria, Oak Bay, Saanich and Central Saanich departments, but the idea was rejected as too costly.

Likewise, a 1990 provincial government study titled "Policing In The Year 2001" bemoaned the "fragmentation and duplication of services" in the capital region and called for amalgamation. It presented four options:

n Merging the Victoria, Saanich, Oak Bay, Central Saanich and Esquimalt departments.

n Creating a single force for the Saanich Peninsula

n Creating three forces covering the Peninsula, West Shore and four core municipalities.

n Creating a capital region force.

It summarized the arguments for a regional force. "A large force with area-wide jurisdiction, communications, criminal identification and crime analysis can range across its territory as criminals do, without regard for borders," it said.

"It can be more effective in preventing crime and arresting criminals than several small forces."

jknox@tc.canwest.com

lkines@tc.canwest.com

kderosa@tc.canwest.com