

# Remarks to the OPSB

Delegation from Ottawa Witness Group: Lessons learned  
& transformations for the Ottawa Police Service  
27 July 2020

## Opening Comments

- Thank you for hearing our presentation (a written submission in English & French was sent to your E.D., along with copy of these remarks).
- My colleague from the Ottawa Witness Group, Bob Thomson, joins me. We were among founders of the Group in 2002, and have for many years supported observing police work at public demonstrations.
- Our points today bear on the continuing need for public engagement in the reviewing policing, particularly the scope of OPS programs and consequent re-financing.

# Community Engagement

- At this time of widespread public interest in the role of police services, the time is ripe to broaden the review of those services [see the introductory paragraphs of our written submission].
- This widespread interest represents an opportunity to renew and transform the roles and policies of the Ottawa police service.
- We call for greater public support on policing in Ottawa generally, particularly, to clarify the purpose and proper police role in supporting, not leading with respect to issues of mental health versus criminality. Citizens need to be far more aware of the supportive role of the OPS mental health unit, for example.

## Relevance of our experience in Cultural Change

- We believe that the major transformation in policing comes from cultural change. As a citizens group, we played a role [see the Background in our written submission] in how the OPS transformed its policy in accompanying demonstrators.
- As you will read, efforts in this respect were led by former mayor Marion Dewar, former United Church Moderator Anne Squire and the Citizens Panel on Policing & the Community.
- A major policy statement (which no longer is found on the OPS website) was the *Agenda for Excellence*, which transformed policing of demonstrations from “hard hat” to “soft hat”.
- A lesson from these efforts is that lasting cultural change in policing comes with public engagement, support and constant awareness.

## Richness of Resources for Public Review of Police Service In Ottawa

- Our written submission gives a short list of the resources that come immediately to mind when considering this opportunity for a public review of policy in our national capital.
- We note the relevance of our own archives, which are now available more readily on line, and which stem from our experiences and public reflections on the then-militarization of policing (notable of the G-20), and which are found in current concerns about policing generally.
- Other resources are listed in our submission.
- As our experience with the Citizens Panel illustrates, however, the major resource is the reflections and engagement of citizens of the City. We urge the OPSB to recommend that such a process be undertaken once again to refresh public understanding of policing, and needed transformations.

## Concluding comments

- We note the evident need for the OPS to take a secondary role in the many crisis situations involving mental health – which stem from inter-generational trauma, social and economic deprivation and matters that can be exacerbated by a Service culture geared overwhelmingly to enforcement.
- As our submission notes:
  - ...while crime in Canada generally has been diminishing, police budgets and in some cases, militarization, has been increasing.
  - One element...may be the reduction in social service budgets and increasing Police spending, thus tasking Police with duties they are ill equipped to handle...
  - Thus supporting arguments for reallocation of police spending to social programmes.
- Finally, we applaud the notion of police “service”. For citizens are not the “enemy”, as sometimes portrayed in our Southern Neighbour, but those in need of protection and complex socio-economic services, sensitive to needs and to de-escalation.