Mayor Sam Katz and Members of the Executive Policy Committee:

" Why do 9 out of 10 major police cities in Canada have some form of Police Commission, yet Winnipeg does not? Does Winnipeg know something that other cities don't?" Tom Simms, Inner City Safety Coalition.

I am here today in support of those at the Protection and Community Services Committee who voted against having an advisory board. In my opinion this proposed board is nothing more than a public relations strategy (an opinion, I am sure, that is shared by many citizens of Winnipeg) which has no substance behind it. Please tell me why we need another board which provides advice to city council on police matters, when, in fact, in my opinion, the committee on protection and community services has been completely ineffective in managing the Winnipeg Police Service (for example, Committee on Protection and community services has never been able to ascertain fom the police chief how effective the aggressive panhandling by law is).

Furthermore, this proposed board will not be transparent, most of it's board meetings will be held behind closed doors, instead of all meetings being open to the public. Neither will this board be able to over see police department budgets, staffing levels, labour relations in general or even the hiring of a police chief, never mind them being able to probe police misconduct cases! In the Mayor's opinion, LERA (Law Enforcement Review Agency) is the body responsible, not an advisory board or even a police commission in probing police misconduct cases.

But as anyone who knows anything about LERA, it is largely an ineffective body. Investigations are long and drawn out - to the point where many complaints against the police are abandoned. Nor is it transparent or accountable to anyone. In some cases, the police have used intimidation tactics at LERA hearings and, worst of all, if LERA finds the complaint in the complainant's favour, the worst punishment that a police officer has yet to receive is a suspension WITH pay! If, in fact, Mayor Katz prefers to have LERA overseeing the police, he should at least publically acknowledge the need for a complete overhaul of LERA in order to make it effective, or support the establishment of an independent police commission.

One of the key principles on civilian over-sight of the police service is to de-politicize decisions making of the police service. That is, the police must operate independently and without influence or even appearance of influence of inforcing the law, while at the same time being accountable to the public for fiscal or operational matters. A police advisory board does nothing to de-politicize decision-making of the police service.

Why is it that cities all across Canada, except Winnipeg have recognised the importance of establishing arms length civilian police commissions in oder to provide a balance of police independence on one hand, and public accountability on the other hand? For example, if we had a civilian police commission , would the chief would be able to challenge Mayor Sam Katz on his approach on addressing crime?

There is a fundamental contradiction between the traditional model of policing (law enforcement) and the community policing model (peacekeeping). How would the Mayor feel if the new police chief questioned the organizational structure and philosophy of the current, traditional model of policing where the majority of the police are deployed in cars, responding to a variety of calls for service? The community policing model allows the police to deal with recurring problems in specific neighbourhoods on a long-term basis.

Our City requires policing that is based on decissions that are grounded on good public policy under direction of an independent and arms length police commission. The status quo approach to police governance in Winnipeg lacks accountability and is ineffective. A police commission with decision making authority rather that simply an advisory role, would make the issue of accountability more direct and transparent.

I am completely supportive of the Inner City Safety Coalition's mandate to have an independent civilian police commission established in terms of allowing ordinary citizens to hire and fire police chiefs, determine police budgets and gain decision-making powers. And for those of us political activists whose relationship to police has been somewhat hostile, to say the least, we are concerned with the relationship between police and dissenters, be they the peace group, women's movement, labour, etc..

What I have noticed since 9/11 is a fundamental change in the attitude of police towards dissenters. Police now see the need to crush any group who protests against anything, as potential terrorists. While police used to intimidate protest groups through criminal charges, they now have a new weapon, the Provincial Highway Traffic Act. Now that's psychological intimidation (just look what happened to Critical Mass). For someone who might have attended a demonstration for the first time, this would most certainly deter them from participating in even more demonstrations. When I questioned former Chief David Cassels about his Community Policing (Peacekeeping) Model, he said that he would recognize the right for any political group to protest, would condone the use of agent provocateurs (that is police infiltrating political groups and inciting violence) and would establish a non-adversarial association between dissenters and the police.

It is within the parameters of transparency and accountability that requires an arms' length civilian police commission to provide a balance of police independence and public accountability, whose role is not to advise, but to in fact, oversee police department budgets, staffing levels, labour relations, hiring of police chiefs, and most important the ability to deal with police misconduct.

Thank You

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Nick Ternette is a social and political activist and freelance writer.