

**Oppal is right: Gangs are nothing new
(But we haven't yet learned how to deal with them)**
by Tom Stamatakis

Last week, Attorney General Wally Oppal was roundly criticized for suggesting that we have had a gang crime problem in the Lower Mainland for a long time. I have been a police officer in the City of Vancouver since 1990 and the fact is that Mr. Oppal is correct.

The shame is that since 1990, we have had more than enough time to reform our criminal justice system, methods of service delivery, and education of our youth all of which are essential elements of any meaningful solution to address this crisis. We just haven't paid enough attention to the problem that has never gone away.

I recall patrolling the southeast part of the City in the early 1990's when an innocent person was gunned down while walking his dog. The victim was mistakenly identified as a gang member by a rival gang crime group.

I remember the hue and cry then with many calls to "get tough" on gang crime. Task forces were created, reform was promised. Some of the kids involved in this activity were killed, others grew up, and some just got smarter. The problem seemed to abate and it appears everyone but the police forgot about it. Police officers continued to deal with the drive-by shootings, targeted hits, and violence associated with gang activity. Fortunately, at least no other innocent victims were killed, although many were quietly victimized and the issue was largely forgotten.

Fast forward to 2001: the Liberal government set the wheels in motion for significant reform of how police service was delivered in the Province of British Columbia. There was talk of a regional police force in the Lower Mainland and Lower Island and a re-consideration of the existing funding formula to generate more revenue that could then be re-focused on new policing initiatives and resources.

These reforms would have been very timely, given that police staffing levels had not kept pace with population growth and policing capacity had been further impacted by many other factors, which meant fewer police officers on the street combating crime. Unfortunately, the opposition from various mayors and their police chiefs was deafening; how dare the provincial Government interfere in their communities, they asked. The provincial government backed down.

Then, the new focus became "*integration*". The theory was that if police officers were taken from different jurisdictions and made to work together, that would be an effective way to combat gang crime activities occurring across those jurisdictions. In 2007, (after creating a number of integrated policing units), we were shocked when two innocent people were caught in the crossfire of a gang shooting.

Again there was an outcry. More task forces were created and again there was lots of discussion of reform of the justice system and how best to deliver police service. The discussion is good; I hope something comes of it this time.

The reality is that this gang activity is not *new* activity, and despite the integrated units we've created and the gang task forces we've again established, we have again seen another string of brazen shootings, and more people have been killed.

The NDP opposition are calling for tough measures to combat this gang activity and are demanding action from the government, the courts and the police. Easy to say this however they seem to always be the first to criticize when the police do take action to deal with difficult

situations and where the outcome is not always pleasant. Some police leaders seem to be more interested in criticizing each other rather than working together to come up with meaningful solutions to a public safety crisis. One in particular talked about how some solutions are long term and others can be implemented quickly but then eliminated a drug education program in schools in his community, this despite the fact that research proves that if you want to prevent kids from becoming involved in crime you have to intervene in a positive way when they are young. What better place for that to occur than a school?

The Liberal Government has returned all provincial traffic fine revenues to municipalities for several years now. The Federal Government provided \$59 million to the Province as part of a Federal initiative to hire more front line officers in municipalities. Unfortunately both levels of government have not necessarily directed these funds to front line policing initiatives that might have made a difference.

It's long past time to set aside the political rhetoric, the parochial and petty jurisdictional turf wars and instead focus on what is actually best for citizens in this community. This has to include everyone working together so that gangs and gang members cannot move freely in our communities while engaging in harmful and reckless behaviour.

Many other jurisdictions have effectively dealt with similar gang crime by:

- Making legislative or bylaw changes to assist police in taking immediate action to disrupt gang crime activity
- Moving away from the 'one size fits all' model of integration we are currently bound into: The province should provide direct funding to municipalities that are particularly hard hit so that additional officers can target a problem in a more responsive way without impacting public safety in other areas. Municipalities cannot be expected to deal with what is a regional problem on their own.
- Downplaying strategies that focus on long term investigations dealing with issues like importation of drugs or that rely on expensive, labour-intensive and difficult to obtain authorizations for action. These strategies further stretch already scarce police resources, they are difficult to prosecute successfully, sentences are usually minor, and very few 'gang members' are actually convicted. Instead focus on quick investigations of less complex criminal activity that can be more easily prosecuted. This will more frequently disrupt gang activity and while consequences will not necessarily be great initially, if these individuals attempt to continue a criminal lifestyle, the cumulative effect will have a greater impact than what we've seen to date.

These are just three suggestions that will have an immediate and effective impact. So while those in a position to make some of these decisions continue to dither and point fingers at each other, the front line police officers I represent will collectively continue to do their best to try and protect the innocent public from getting caught in the crossfire and dread having to make the next 'death notification'.

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