Time to Drop the Mounted: Reimagining a Royal Canadian Gendarmerie

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As Canada’s federal police force celebrates its 150th anniversary, the past and future of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada (RCMP/GRC) is coming under intense scrutiny. Dogged by historical legacies and endemic external and internal controversies, the gendarmerie is a national police force with military characteristics that serves the Canadian state loyally and professionally. The anachronistic connection with horses in the English name has long outlived its usefulness and it is time that Canada’s federal police force embraced more French, greater inclusivity in the ranks, better accountability, and a functional approach to provision of national security policing at higher levels. A new refresh requires rebranding into a true gendarmerie adequately manned, trained, and equipped for the task, already anticipated in the French name. Refocusing on federal roles at the national level without the distraction of contract policing would give the RCMP/GRC greater purpose and coherence. The aligned symmetry of a Royal Canadian Gendarmerie/Gendarmerie royale du Canada (RCG/GRC) provides a basis for necessary change to happen and reconciliation to begin.
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As Canada’s federal police force celebrates its 150th anniversary, the past and future of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada (RCMP/GRC) is coming under intense scrutiny. Dogged by historical legacies and endemic external and internal controversies, the gendarmerie is a national police force with military characteristics that serves the Canadian state loyally and professionally. The anachronistic connection with horses in the English name has long outlived its usefulness and it is time that Canada’s federal police force embraced more French, greater inclusivity in the ranks, better accountability, and a functional approach to provision of national security policing at higher levels. A new refresh requires rebranding into a true gendarmerie adequately manned, trained, and equipped for the task, already anticipated in the French name. Refocusing on federal roles at the national level without the distraction of contract policing would give the RCMP/GRC greater purpose and coherence. The aligned symmetry of a Royal Canadian Gendarmerie/Gendarmerie royale du Canada (RCG/GRC) provides a basis for necessary change to happen and reconciliation to begin.

Keywords: Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Gendarmerie royale du Canada, national security policing, gendarmerie, history of policing, Canada
Introduction

The year 2023 marked the 150\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada (RCMP/GRC) and its predecessors. The red serge uniform of Canada’s federal police force remains among the most iconic and recognizable brands in the country and around the world. So iconic that at one time a special licensing agreement was arranged with Disney, to protect property rights and official usage around the brand (Dawson, 1998). Behind this popular façade however lies at times a troubled police organization that struggles with too many commitments in multiple directions, at least within available resources and recruitment levels, and facing serious allegations of entrenched sexism, systemic racism, and the historical legacies of state policies against indigenous peoples and other minority groups. The weight of history, despite the celebratory mood of any anniversary, has not been kind to the RCMP/GRC, in the Canadian government’s march toward reconciliation and acknowledgement of past wrongs (Figure 1). True, the RCMP/GRC was a settler colonial institution based on its historical record and conduct, but today’s modern professional police force offers services across the country in federal and contract policing roles (Marquis, 2016). It does so relatively cheaply through cost-sharing agreements with provinces, territories, and municipalities that provide great value. The trade-off is an RCMP/GRC style of policing that fits awkwardly with community-based policing models, raises questions about use of appropriate force, and poses enduring problems with accountability (Bhayani, 2012). The RCMP/GRC, through its recent procurement activities and organizational training, is becoming more gendarmerie, in line with its French nomenclature.

Part of the conundrum behind this crisis of identity is realization that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada really has neither a clear idea of what it should
be nor has been particularly good at articulating that to the government and the general public. Instead, pretty uniforms and the showmanship of the Musical Ride stand in substitute, where the anachronistic infatuation with horses persists. The equestrian side of the RCMP/GRC long ago subsided in regular day-to-day line duties in favour of patrol cruisers, marine vessels, aircraft, and offices. Beyond symbolic ceremony and parades, few RCMP/GRC members ride horses officially. Why then is the word mounted still explicitly in the English name? Heritage considerations and nostalgia alone are insufficient to justify its retention. In fact, many persons hold negative feelings toward the federal police force, for its handling of indigenous peoples and heavy-handed approach to public order policing, usually at provincial and lower levels. The mounted reference is a reminder of a troubling past lingering beneath the surface of the “Mountie” brand. Transforming organizational culture in an institution steeped in tradition and notoriously obstructive of change no doubt shall take time, but simple renaming is a good place to start and signals that the federal government and the police force are ready for a refresh. In fact, the gendarmerie can be made more capable and responsive to the security and public safety concerns facing the Canadian state.

The question is not if the RCMP/GRC is militarized, but whether the gendarmerie is military-like enough in capabilities and operational planning (Beede, 2008). Far better to have a well-trained gendarmerie dedicated to higher level national security policing (Kirisci, 2022) than abolishing the RCMP/GRC altogether and starting afresh with a new federal police force. For some advocates of disarming and defunding police in Canada even that does not go far enough. Substituting the word gendarmerie in English therefore represents a small concession, to build something better.

**Buffing a Tarnished Brand**
To say that the RCMP/GRC has been under a dark cloud for decades is probably
understatement. The first disquieting stirrings came from the McDonald Commission that
documented several illegal acts - planting bombs and unauthorized entries - perpetrated by the
federal police force in the province of Québec against political targets of opportunity during the
1970s (Commission of Inquiry Concerning Certain Activities of the Royal Canadian Mounted
Police, 1981). Several RCMP/GRC members were criminally charged and as the facts became
known led to political outcries about national security policing efforts crossing the threshold of
legality, in efforts to counter a provincial separatist movement. Contrition was less about being
cought out using such tactics, but that the RCMP/GRC leadership assured responsible ministers
that it was the exception and not the norm (Mann & Lee, 1979). They were not believed
(d’Ombrain, 1999). In 1984, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) assumed the
domestic surveillance and security function from the RCMP/GRC, which confined itself to
criminal investigations and counter-intelligence (Whitaker, Kealey, & Parnaby, 2012). Failings
of the RCMP/GRC, identified by another major commission of inquiry, related to the 1985
terrorist downing of an Air India flight flying from Canada to London and deaths of 329 people
over Lockerbie, Scotland, revealed many unresolved problems within the organization
(Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182, 2010).
Meanwhile, the RCMP/GRC’s involvement in the detention and rendition of Maher Arar, a
Canadian holding dual citizenship travelling through the United States, resulting in his torture in
a Syrian prison before delayed return to Canada received criticism, media attention, and
eventually an apology and compensation from the Canadian government (Commission of Inquiry
into the Actions of Canadian Officials in Relation to Maher Arar, 2006). The police force held
back information and limited sharing ostensibly for reasons of national security, that at times put
close relations with American counterparts and allies ahead of adhering strictly to Canadian policy and laws. The 2007 tasering death of Robert Dziekanski, a Polish national reuniting with his mother, at the hands of four RCMP/GRC members dispatched to the Vancouver airport showed similar reticence about relaying accurate information that might be detrimental to the police force’s image and contradicting previous statements (Petrovich, 2019). Misleading testimony before a provincial commission of inquiry conducted by retired Supreme Court of British Columbia Justice Thomas Braidwood resulted in perjury charges for those involved (Braidwood Commission, 2010). The RCMP/GRC subsequently settled several related civil actions quietly out of court. In those years, Canada’s gendarmerie appeared to lurch from one high-profile scandal to another (Perrott and Kelloway, 2010), the brand damaged a little bit more every time and confidence from the public and government chipping away.

Over the last decade, the hit on the brand has mostly come from parliamentary and public questions about the internal workings of the RCMP/GRC, specifically regarding people and dominant organizational culture (Workman-Stark, 2021). Pay scales in the gendarmerie fell behind other provincial, metropolitan, and municipal police forces across the country (Aust, 2012; Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2015), due to federal budgetary constraints and stunted unionization in the federal police force (Slinn, 2015). RCMP/GRC members below the rank of Inspector received the right of collective bargaining and association in an appeal (Supreme Court of Canada, 2015) from an earlier Ontario provincial court decision that deemed existing arrangements in the police force unconstitutional (Ontario Superior Court of Justice, 2009). A collective agreement negotiated between the employer, Treasury Board of Canada, and the National Police Federation, representing RCMP/GRC members falling under its terms, came into effect in August 2021, and brought salaries up to parity with the Ontario Provincial Police (the
best paid police force in Canada) with payment of retroactive pay increases back five years. Disgruntled RCMP/GRC members removed the yellow stripes from their service uniforms to protest slowness on the pay issue and the official response (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2017). As a police union, the National Police Federation also endorsed other forms of expression, such as controversial wearing of “Thin Blue Line” symbols on service uniforms during duty hours, contrary to standing orders and regulations, and challenging changes in policy restricting or banning chokeholds and certain non-standard types of weaponry. The federal Minister of Public Safety, responsible for oversight of the RCMP/GRC, has shown particular interest in rectifying those issues. Whereas individual RCMP/GRC members and the police union might claim solidarity within and across police forces, such acts may be construed as defiance of authority and civilian oversight, against policies that they may not like but are necessary for preserving the public good (Sewell, 2021).

Unionization and collective bargaining are not inherently incompatible with a gendarmerie, if mutually endorsed. The National Police Federation is still a relatively new and maturing public service union.

Allegations of endemic sexism and racism within the RCMP/GRC have been far more intractable to acknowledge and address, affecting recruitment and retention in the gendarmerie. Females remained a minority within the federal police force and confronted day-to-day challenges working alongside male colleagues and for career advancement (Schmidt, 2011; Schmidt, 2013). In some cases, they were subjected to harassing behaviour and bullying (McKay, 2014), gender discrimination, and sexual impropriety (Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, 2022). The problem went on for so long and to such a scale that the government settled a class action lawsuit started by Janet Merlo to the tune of $125 million CAD.
encompassing over 2,300 victims (Public Safety Canada, 2016). A comprehensive final report at the end of the claims process catalogued numerous deficiencies in training, human resource management, and leadership, concluding that sexual discrimination was pervasive in RCMP/GRC culture at every level and across Canada in every geographic area (Bastarache, 2020). Most tellingly, the individual stories of victims and their experiences were included beside the claims. Clearly, the RCMP/GRC must seriously address sexism to attract more females into the gendarmerie and give them satisfying career paths flexible enough to accommodate gender-specific needs and convince them to stay until a fully vested pensionable age after a fulfilling career.

Racism, whether implicit or explicit, has also pervaded Canada’s federal police force. Years ago, rank-and-file members campaigned against the RCMP/GRC allowing wearing of turbans in accordance with religious beliefs: Baltej Singh Dillon became the first Sikh to wear the religious head covering after the RCMP/GRC dress regulations were amended in 1989 and he enjoyed a long career in the federal police force (Mann, 2020). Although unpopular amongst some segments of Canadian society particularly in western Canada that invited legal and political challenges, a Canadian federal court upheld the Charter right of all members serving in the RCMP/GRC to be treated equally without discrimination, whatever faith or religion they followed (Federal Court of Canada, 1994). While the workplace became more welcoming officially, racism at detachments and headquarters persisted amongst colleagues as well as interactions with the general public. Many RCMP/GRC members were still predominantly white males recruited from rural areas with high school education, who brought their biases and small-town mentalities with them (Klancher, 1999). As Canada’s urban centres became more ethnically diverse from immigration, the RCMP/GCR tried to broaden out recruitment efforts, with
variegated results because the gendarmerie was based on conformity rather than difference. In June 2020, Commissioner Brenda Lucki acknowledged that systemic racism existed inside the RCMP/GRC and promised to do better. Soon after, a class action was started by Margorie Hudson, a long-serving indigenous female member, on behalf of any racialized employees subjected to racial discrimination and harassment based on race that stunted careers and advancement. Complaints handled by an independent civilian review commission and forwarded to the Commissioner included accusations of racial profiling and sexual preying on young indigenous girls by on-duty RCMP/GRC members.

No matter how much internal reviews and reports and departmental responses minimized the extent of sexism and racism inside the RCMP/GRC (Task Force on Governance and Cultural Change in the RCMP, 2007; Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2017a), toleration for such behaviour amongst the public and government was low. The brand could be polished and rubbed down to shine like new, but the old riding boot still stayed the same with all its flaws and creases.

**Where are the Horses**

For a modern-day gendarmerie, the attachment to the descriptor mounted in the English name for the RCMP/GRC is a curious throw-back to a previous era. Horses were ridden and expended during the 1874 Great March West by the police force that established a permanent role and presence in western Canada (Beahen and Horrall, 1998). The prairies and great plains favoured equestrian riders because roads and communications were minimal and sources of forage were available. Mounted patrols between established towns and forts imposed law and order (Monaghan, 2013). The Royal North-West Mounted Police employed horses during the 1885 Rebellion, the First World War, and an expedition sent across the Pacific Ocean to
Vladivostok during the Russian Civil War as well as suppressing labour unrest during the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919 (Horrall, 1980). When the Royal Canadian Mounted Police became the federal police force in 1920 with absorption of the Dominion Police, the heyday of the horse was almost over (Kelly, 1973). The interwar period saw progressive replacement of horses by the internal combustion engine powering automobiles and motor bikes in regular police work (Horall, 1973). Virtually no horses were used by the RCMP/GRC during the Second World War. Equitation training for new recruits at the Regina depot stopped in 1966 (Kelly and Kelly, 1984). Thus, horses were notably absent for much of the modern police force’s development in the 20th and early 21st centuries, being relegated to mostly ceremonial functions and public relations (Figure 2).

The Musical Ride, a show demonstration team, symbolizes the RCMP/GRC’s most enduring attachment to the horse. A troop of thirty-two riders drawn from uniformed police members perform carefully choreographed and practiced movements before large and small audiences across the country on a visiting schedule (Kelly, 1996). The Musical Ride’s stables reside in the toney Ottawa neighbourhood of Rockcliffe beside the Canadian Police College, and the RCMP/GRC runs its established breeding program at a farm near Pakenham, Ontario. Since 1938, the RCMP/GRC has aspired to a certain conformist look breeding its horses, known for their muscular features and blackness. A few of the best horses have been gifted to the British Royal family, the latest in celebration of the federal police force’s 150th anniversary during the coronation of Charles III, who was an Honorary Commissioner (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2023). Horses not matching those exacting features or deemed surplus to requirements are periodically auctioned off to cover the operating costs of the breeding farm and stables. A similar common look is applied to the breeding and training of
police service dogs at dedicated kennel facilities located near Innisfail, Alberta. RCMP/GRC police service dogs are purebred German shepherds with pointy ears and variations of black and brown colour in coats. Unlike the RCMP/GRC horses, the police service dogs perform operational roles of detection, search, attack, and patrol with their matched handlers (Sheedy, 2011). Though larger Canadian cities like Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal maintain operational horse squads trained for regular police work, the RCMP/GRC-trained horses are mostly for ceremonial show, and not even deployed for crowd control. In other words, they are not work horses like those in municipal police forces. Giving up the Musical Ride, so entrenched in the RCMP/GRC’s institutional culture, identity, and public relations, would probably be no easy matter because the performances of beautiful black horses and red-coated riders are well-attended and popular amongst many Canadians. As a form of conveyance, the horse though no longer has real value in the modern-day RCMP/GRC.

The gendarmerie, in its federal and contract policing roles, operates a fleet of vehicles of various makes and models, said to be the largest in North American law enforcement. Big American automakers and their Canadian satellite manufacturing plants produce police versions of popular sedans and utility vehicles in civilian lineups, most notably the Ford Police Interceptor (Taurus) and Police Interceptor Utility (Explorer) and the Dodge Charger Enforcer and Dodge Durango Enforcer (Mertl, 2016). The RCMP/GRC purchases upwards of 2,000 vehicles each year, split equally between the two types, both marked and unmarked. Pursuit packages have larger engines and better suspension providing for higher speeds (Simpson, 2019). A detachment on Vancouver Island was the first to add a green-friendly electric vehicle, a higher performance Tesla Model Y decked out in RCMP/GRC paint and markings (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2023). Specialized units, the tactical Emergency
Response Team (ERT), and protective details typically drive larger utility vehicles like the Chevrolet Suburban and trucks, able to carry more gear and equipment related to specific tasks.

The RCMP/GRC procured eighteen tactical armoured vehicles (TAV) from Navistar Defence Industries customized from the International MXT to an internal RCMP/GRC statement of requirements/design and produced at West Point, Mississippi. The total contract was valued at $14 million CAD or roughly $800,000 CAD per vehicle (Navistar, 2012). The TAV are paired with ERT in the regional divisions across the country and in the national capital region; they were prominent in last year’s major police operations clearing Freedom Convoy protesters from the streets of Ottawa and Windsor, Ontario (Rouleau, 2023). Government procurement authorities solicited interest and industry feedback for the addition of one or two highly maneuverable counter assault tactical vehicles able to blend into urban settings and withstand small arms fire (Public Works and Government Works Canada, 2020). As well, the RCMP/GRC added the twin engine Airbus H145 helicopter to the gendarmerie’s existing fleet of rotary and fixed wing aircraft, able to transport and deliver ERT, operating out of a municipal airport at Langley, British Columbia. The provincial Sûreté du Québec is the only other police force in Canada operating the H145 helicopter - common in the gendarmerie of Europe and other countries - for its Groupes tactique d’intervention (GTI). Between April 2018 and March 2020, the RCMP/GRC awarded $783 million CAD worth of contracts in its procurement activities, placing the gendarmerie among the top twenty spending federal departments and agencies (Office of the Procurement Ombudsman, 2021). Few other police forces in Canada can match the buying power and funding behind the RCMP/GRC. And nowhere is a horse to be seen, except the stylized Musical Ride horse-rider figure painted on the side of vehicles and aircraft and
appearing on signage outside detachments (Figure 3). The official RCMP/GRC coat-of-arms features a buffalo head, not a horse, in keeping with its heritage and function as a gendarmerie.

**Indigenous Peoples, the RCMP/GRC, and the Burdens of History**

The relationship between Canada’s indigenous population and the RCMP/GRC is a long and difficult one, mostly negative. Despite official apologies from time to time, remarkably little has been said during the 150th anniversary about the trauma and lasting harm caused by RCMP/GRC actions as the hard instrument of Canadian state policy that imposed social control, forced relocation, and dependent subservience. The early years of the constabulary were spent signing treaties for removal of indigenous peoples onto designated reserves from lands on the prairies coveted by white immigrants from the United States and Europe (Beahen and Horrall, 1998). Resistance was met by armed force from the police and military. After the 1885 North-West Rebellion, the primary leaders held responsible were tried for treason - Metis leader Louis Riel was hanged and the Cree tribal chiefs Big Bear and Poundmaker sent to prison (Macleod, 1976). Subjugated and subdued, surviving tribes fell prey to poverty, dismal living conditions, and disease, at the hands of Indian department officials and the mounted police (Graybill, 2007). Even lands set aside for indigenous use were taken away for other purposes such as railway construction and ranching. Indigenous peoples were legally wards of the Canadian government and the RCMP/GRC so employed to enforce laws and stamp out dissent and signs of independence. Between 1953 and 1955, the RCMP/GRC relocated Inuit against their will from northern Québec to islands in the high Arctic (Shackleton, 2012), using false promises, threats, and intimidation. Indigenous peoples therefore can be forgiven for seeing the RCMP/GRC as a cruel purveyor of misfortune over a long period of time, hardly the stuff of commemoration on the 150th anniversary. The discountenance is highlighted perhaps no better than with the
RCMP/GRC’s pivotal participation in implementation of the unpleasant, and for some deadly, residential school system.

Popularly known as the Sixties Scoop, the policies and actions of the Canadian government deliberately removed children from their families in indigenous communities for placement in church-run residential schools, skills and trades institutions, and foster homes with white families, furthering the goal of assimilation. The RCMP/GRC was employed in this heartless task because it had the means to travel to remote locations and the power and authority to enforce the will of the federal government over indigenous people and overcome resistance, by armed or physical intervention if necessary. Consequently, indigenous children, some as young as three or four years old, were taken away and stripped of their own languages, culture, and sense of belonging. The RCMP/GRC returned students who ran away, treating them as truants, and fitfully investigated allegations of physical and sexual abuse by clergy and others when known (LeBeuf, 2011). Many indigenous children died during attendance at residential schools without their families being told and their graves left unmarked. Although available documentation is admittedly incomplete due to active destruction of RCMP/GRC records, the police force’s involvement in the residential school system was more than just negligent.

In two official apologies ten years apart, RCMP/GRC commissioners admitted the federal police force’s culpability and sought to learn from the experience and make sure it never happened again. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission, created out of a settled class action lawsuit brought against the Canadian government by residential school survivors, documented the interaction of the RCMP/GRC with indigenous peoples and preserved individual stories after visiting communities across the country (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Discovery of the unmarked graves on former residential school sites, first at Kamloops,
British Columbia, led to the opening of RCMP/GRC criminal investigations, under enormous pressure from indigenous peoples, the public, and government.

Emerging knowledge about the residential school experience provides an alternative to the conventional narrative behind the RCMP/GRC and its altruism. The on-going cases of missing and murdered indigenous women disclosed the same lack of responsiveness and interest on the part of the RCMP/GRC until forced to act and invoked yet another public apology from an RCMP/GRC commissioner (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, 2019). Given the relentless movement toward acknowledgement of past wrongs and reconciliation, major RCMP/GRC operations countering protests on indigenous lands against economic development and resource exploitation often worked at cross-purposes and sowed further distrust in the relationship.

As part of contract policing with the provinces, the RCMP/GRC regularly deploys its specially trained personnel and gendarmerie capabilities in numbers when indigenous and environmental concerns clash with economic interests and the power of the state in the form of court-issued injunctions. In British Columbia, large-scale protesting of clear-cut logging practices at Clayquot Sound and Haida Gwaii provoked a RCMP/GRC response and for those defying, arrests (Isitt, 2022). The RCMP/GRC forcibly removed many indigenous protesters from the contested areas that they claimed sacred. In Summer 1995, a dispute over land use led to an armed standoff at Gustafsen Lake between a protesting indigenous group and the RCMP/GRC, which brought in ERT, tactical troops, police service dogs, and air support (Mahony, 2001). Since the indigenous protestors were estimated to have one or more AK-47 assault rifles capable of penetrating anything in the police inventory, the Canadian Armed Forces provided, upon a request for assistance from the RCMP/GRC, military Bison armoured
personnel carriers and crews to allow free movement. In New Brunswick near Moncton, violence erupted when the RCMP/GRC tried to enforce a provincial injunction against Elsipogtog First Nation members blocking a roadway used by a private company looking for shale gas (Crosby and Monaghan, 2018). Six police vehicles were burned and numerous arrests made. The RCMP/GRC however at the time and afterwards were accused of being too heavy-handed and insensitive to indigenous culture and recognized rights, some of that criticism found to be valid (Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for the RCMP, 2020).

The RCMP/GRC double-downed on its aggressive approach to dealing with indigenous protests at the provincial-levels. In a series of operations in northern British Columbia on unceded and pristine Wet’suwet’en territories between 2019 and 2021, the Community-Industry Response Group (C-IRG), the militarized operational arm of the RCMP/GRC in British Columbia, launched raids against indigenous encampments and roadblocks preventing access to a private company building a natural gas pipeline through indigenous lands to coast tide water (Supreme Court of British Columbia, 2019; Hume and Walby, 2023; Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2020). So many complaints were received about RCMP/GRC conduct that the independent civilian review commission began an investigation into the C-IRG for this operation and another against environmentalists at Fairy Creek on Vancouver Island, where ERT and tactical troop members wore Thin Blue Line patches prominently, removed name tags for anonymity, and poured liquid irritants into the eyes of bound detained protesters to force submission (Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for the RCMP, 2023). Canadian legislation expressly prohibits the use of torture in all forms, in line with international standards, even by the police acting as public officials. Justice Douglas Thompson concluded that egregious RCMP/GRC conduct had the potential to bring disrepute on
the provincial court and its issue of injunctions (Supreme Court of British Columbia, 2021), this interpretation considered to be an over-step of the law upon appeal (Supreme Court of British Columbia, 2022). The methods and tactics used by the C-IRG were apparently legally justified no matter how counter-productive from a moral and indigenous reconciliation perspective.

The RCMP/GRC sure looked and acted like a gendarmerie on such occasions (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2019b), but the main question surely was why a federally-equipped gendarmerie was being used to enforce provincial injunctions against peaceful protesters in small economic matters involving private companies without any overt national security rationale. That an elected social democrat government in Victoria and some sitting provincial court judges were so eager to deploy a police army provided under contract policing (Palango, 2008) in pursuance of political and economic interests at the expense of indigenous peoples was to say the least inexplicable. Reconciliation was not helped by the gendarmerie’s strong tactics (Wettlaufer, 2011), neither in spirit nor deeds. Indigenous groups loudly called for the C-IRG’s immediate disbandment, Gitxsan heredity chiefs going so far to ban the C-IRG from entering its adjoining unceded territory which the RCMP/GRC curtly replied it would not respect. Sleydo’ (Molly Wickham), one of the prominent Gidimt’en clan spokespeople arrested and charged with criminal contempt, claimed that the settler-colonial RCMP/GRC no longer had legitimacy with her indigenous people and should be abolished entirely. Arresting and trying peaceful protestors protecting the land and inalienable rights just created political prisoners with voice, opposing the oppression of the state and its police forces and believing firmly in the righteousness of their cause (Head, 2011). The RCMP/GRC, whatever displays of gendarmerie prowess with the maligned C-IRG, joined a losing cause in rewriting history and reconciliation with indigenous peoples, to which governments at all levels
were committed at least in principle. Greater likelihood then that the RCMP/GRC should change in the way it operates.

**Worth Saving or Start Anew**

The idea that the RCMP/GRC, in its current form, might be abolished or done away with has gained traction from a wider questioning of police methods and brutality in Canada and North America (Williams, 2015). The singular proposition behind the Black Lives Matter protests was that law enforcement discriminated according to race and socio-economic class and consequently, state-delivered violence disproportionately affected certain populations (Maynard, 2017; Passavant, 2021). In this view, the police were purveyors of violence to enforce social norms and defend entrenched economic structures, buttressed by the courts and the legal system. Envisioning something better, police abolition advocates called for the police to be disarmed, defunded, and dismantled (Kaba and Ritchie, 2022; Pasternak, Walby, and Stadnyk, 2022) because the police themselves were incapable or unwilling to undertake serious reform and be held better accountable to the publics they served (Vitale, 2017). That the RCMP/GRC was a gendarmerie fitted out with military-like equipment and using aggressive law enforcement tactics with little or no accountability therefore is what can be expected, even when pretending to be a community-based police force (Stelkia, 2020). Neocleous (2021) argues that the debate has less to do with police militarization than the manifestation and exercise of police power to uphold the authority of the state and the economic interests it exerts and protects (Towns, 2022).

The RCMP/GRC was already militarized and has been for a long time (Shantz, 2016) because the Canadian state needs a gendarmerie or similar national police force for certain functions, especially in the national security sphere, one step below the military, when violence or the threat of violence becomes necessary (Brodeur, 2010). The more questionable practice has
been the use of an ever more militarizing gendarmerie for contracted provincial and lower-level policing, and its appropriateness (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2017b), that led to rogue organizations within the police like the C-IRG. Police abolitionists and advocates of defunding certainly believed the RCMP/GRC had no place in such policing, and even questioned its on-going existence altogether. That begs the obvious question of what replaces the RCMP/GRC if a new federal police force is desired, and the contracted part of the role is assumed by other police forces over time. And, does having a professional and well-trained gendarmerie continue to have enduring value, if properly confined to the federal and national security spheres (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2019a). The answer really revolves around whether the RCMP/GRC is seen to be irredeemable.

Contract policing represents the Achilles-heel of the RCMP/GRC as a functional gendarmerie. That part of the federal police force costs the most and attracts the greatest criticism (Hewitt, 2006), even without the added ire of indigenous peoples and environmentalists. There really is a receding future for the RCMP/GRC in contract policing provincially and municipally. It is only a matter of time before British Columbia and Alberta re-establish provincial police forces when existing agreements come to term, or sooner (Lunney, Government of Alberta, 2021). Likewise, the three territories in northern Canada, once they achieve provincehood, likely will also want locally-sourced police forces suited to their cultural and linguistic needs like the provinces of Ontario and Québec. Grande Prairie recently voted to replace the RCMP/GRC with its own city police force (City of Grand Prairie, 2023), while politics in Surrey, British Columbia’s second largest city, swayed back and forth between the newly established Surrey Police Service and retaining the RCMP/GRC municipally, with the provincial Attorney General having the final decision. In practical terms, the Great March East
has already begun for the RCMP/GRC as more provinces and communities weigh their choices for policing. Concerns about the RCMP/GRC response to a gunman masquerading as a uniformed member in a look-alike police vehicle who went on an overnight killing spree before being identified and shot by ERT at a roadside gas station provided impetus for considering a new regional police force in one or more Maritime provinces (Mass Casualty Commission, 2023). Indigenous peoples were also asking for their own police forces of jurisdiction on territories and lands, to augment or replace current arrangements with the RCMP/GRC.

Across Canada, the RCMP/GRC could find itself in a slow retreat on the contract policing front, in short order. In the meantime, the current federal government has set specific priorities: progress on enhanced civilian oversight of law enforcement agencies including the RCMP/GRC (Roach, 2022), modernized training for police and law enforcement, including standards surrounding use of force, greater RCMP/GRC movement toward more community-led policing, and advancing in cooperation with indigenous peoples the legislative framework for considering First Nations policing an essential service (Public Safety Canada, 2020). Decreased contract policing and closer political oversight shall justify a much smaller RCMP/GRC in numbers and footprint (Leuprecht, 2017), and thereby reinforce the gendarmerie’s employment in federal and national security policing as the main business line in provision of services. The RCMP/GRC’s ERT, for instance, could reassume the domestic counter-terrorism tactical role from the Canadian Armed Forces, which the federal police gave up when Joint Task Force 2 replaced the Special Emergency Response Team (SERT) at Dwyer Hill (Pugliese, 2002; Wentzell, 2022). Ending contract policing creates many possibilities for redirecting personnel and resources to major criminal investigations and organized crime as well, two areas chronically under-served in the RCMP/GRC (Boudreau, 2014).
Another perennial weakness that a refocused gendarmerie needs to address is the lack of working ability in Canada’s both official languages on the part of the institution and individual members. The RCMP/GRC is among the least bilingual agencies in the federal government outside the national capital region of Ottawa/Gatineau. Although subject to posting and relocation throughout the country, RCMP/GRC members may spend entire careers or lengthy periods of service in only one province, territory, or region where French is not spoken to any extent (Saul, 1990). Except in Québec, the RCMP/GRC operates almost exclusively in English, having only one francophone detachment compared to 619 bilingual or English language-only in the remainder of the country (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2018a). Taking in more francophone recruits and providing second language training for English speakers provide stop-gaps for achieving a truly integrated gendarmerie comfortable in both official languages and able to deliver full service. Advancement to the highest ranks in the RCMP/GRC certainly demands a mix of the right experience and good language profiles, as well as political endorsement (Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, 2018b & 2018c). The requirements for language proficiency must be pushed down the rank structure position by position, and start much earlier in career to make-up deficiencies. The current ceiling in mid-rank for many uniformed members is largely dependent on language scores in the other official language. A transition in name from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to a Royal Canadian Gendarmerie means a gendarmerie suited to the tasks allotted that reinforces the French character.

**Conclusion**

Change is coming to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, whether welcomed or not. The 150th anniversary furnishes a fine opportunity to reflect on the
RCMP/GRC’s historical record, what the gendarmerie has become, and where it might go in the future. Due to constraints on space, this descriptive retrospective article necessarily highlights some missteps and problem areas for the RCMP/GRC that likely will not find a prominent place in the official narrative of commemoration. Canada’s gendarmerie clearly lacks focus and remains stretched thin balancing commitments with available resources and big expectations, but the good work that the RCMP/GRC performs day in and out as a professional and well-trained police force is no way diminished. Canada’s federal police force enjoys an iconic law enforcement brand that should never be taken for granted. It also carries quite a bit of baggage from its history and legacy with indigenous peoples – few other institutions in Canada are so inherently settler colonial than the RCMP/GRC. The wisdom of having a high-level gendarmerie employed in contracted provincial and municipal policing, no matter the evident cost advantages, also deserves rethinking. The RCMP/GRC style of policing creates challenges for genuine community-based policing, application of force and violence, and accountability, never mind the constant bad press from the police force’s internal problems that tarnish its reputation. If the RCMP/GRC is merely the cheaper option, provinces and municipalities should know exactly what they are getting in employing a gendarmerie, a national police force with military-like characteristics and capabilities. Contract policing constitutes a huge distraction for the RCMP/GRC that prevents more focused attention on core federal and national security policing suited to a gendarmerie.

Renaming the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in English more in accordance with the French, Gendarmerie royale du Canada, represents a simple bold move to revamp the federal police force while reinforcing its character and functions in higher level policing of national interest. It would seem preferable to establishing a new federal police force, to replace the
RCMP/GRC completely as some advocates of police abolition demand. Alternatively, the RCMP could be hived off to concentrate on small town and rural policing in western and northern Canada like the Gendarmerie nationale in France, and the RCG/GRC be responsible solely for major federal investigations, counter-intelligence, and national security policing akin to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the United States. The RCMP/GRC has basically emulated the FBI since the days of Commissioner James Howden MacBrien in the 1930s and the two law enforcement agencies work very closely. Whatever fate awaits the RCMP/GRC, any decision to transform and change is sure to invoke opposition and heated debate from supporters inside and outside the police force and at least one federal political party, if the earlier controversy over wearing of turbans in the RCMP/GRC is any predictor. The RCMP/GRC remains entrenched in popular Canadiana and national culture as an icon. But Canada’s gendarmerie must become more French, more inclusive with less overt sexism and racism in the ranks, and more accountable for its actions and decisions. The time has come to send the old horse out to pasture.

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