

## Opinion Piece

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Now that Vancouver has experienced its second Stanley Cup related riot in two decades the predictable calls for a review are flowing and much examination of the police response is inevitable and necessary.

While many with the benefit of hindsight are claiming the riot was inevitable and preventable, I take exception to that perspective. "Didn't we learn anything from 1994?" is the prevailing mantra of the critics

Yes, police learned plenty. The problem is that this isn't 1994 and many things are different. There was no "Social Media" although perhaps "Anti-Social Media" would be a more appropriate moniker. Live helicopter coverage of this riot brought it into our living rooms in much the same fashion as TV news coverage changed public perception during the Vietnam War. That coverage focused on individual outbreaks of violence but was unable to provide the entire picture to the audience. On the positive side, the follow-up investigation and identification of the culprits will be infinitely easier.

The police response cannot focus on one or two individual sites. Indeed it can have disastrous results when a myopic perspective of the event influences decisions made at the command level. The entire area and all the activity within that area must be taken into account. The prioritization, coordination and mobilization of finite police resources must then occur.

An inappropriate response to a bad situation will only exacerbate the problem. Luckily that did not occur this time. The response was controlled, disciplined and effective. The riot was brought under control and over in three hours, half the time than in '94. While many are questioning the response time, I personally believe it was remarkable given the dynamics of the situation. At the end of the day the safety of the public and the police is paramount.

The decision to invite thousands of people into the downtown core to participate in the Canucks run for the cup wasn't made by the police. Indeed it was the CBC, the national broadcaster, which hosted one big party. I can't imagine they would have done so if they believed beforehand that a riot was inevitable.

Vancouver has successfully hosted many large events since 1994. The Celebration of Lights, Grey Cups in 1999 and 2005, and the 2010 Winter Olympic Games come to mind.

There seems to be zeal to remove the media fueled "No Fun City" label for Vancouver. Is that label accurate? I can think of numerous "Fun" events. The Sun Run, Vancouver International Marathon, Celebration of Lights, Jazz Festival, Rio Tinto Alcan Dragon Boat Festival, Comedy Festival, Children's Festival, Folk Festival, Bard on the Beach, Pride Parade and Festival, to name but a few.

That said there is a certain mentality in the Vancouver region that defies logic or understanding. The popular "Monster Truck" events held in 25 major North American cities only had one problem stop on their itinerary: Vancouver. BC Place Stadium and the Vancouver police had to develop a very high profile, and aggressive police presence to prevent violence at these events.

There are many problems policing large, public gatherings, especially emotionally charged gatherings. The most obvious challenge is cost. Events held at large, open sites pose the challenge of a lack of security infrastructure such as controlled access and egress, fencing, fixed seating, washrooms, etc.

How does one restrict entry to a large, open site? Conversely, how much does it cost to erect all the elements necessary to provide that temporary infrastructure? Those elements also impose a level of control many events resist. At the end of the day it isn't the police that make the final decision.

Policing these events is extremely expensive and it is an expense most promoters, publically and privately funded, resist. The vast majority requires little security intervention to be successful. Introduce alcohol into the mix and the challenge increases. When nothing happens, the perception exists that security spending was for naught. Much like insurance or emergency preparedness, however, when you need it, you really need it.

The cost to train, equip, exercise and deploy a large policing unit such as a Public Order Unit is huge. Police managers must exercise good stewardship with the public purse, so a great deal of risk management is relied upon when deploying these resources. That said, the VPD in my experience would never jeopardize public safety to save a buck. It is always easier to determine appropriate levels of policing after an event.

The police play a significant role in public safety but that responsibility is shared with government and event promoters. Any review must take a hard look at all contributing aspects to the riot.

The recommendations that will come from the riot review will have a price tag. Those dollars will likely be provided initially, but as memory of this calamity wane so too will the appetite to fund them.