

Better Policing is an Urgent Priority (April 16, 2023)

Good Sunday Morning!

Six days and counting to Earth Day! The Green Party is holding more local cross-country events than ever! Coast to coast to coast details will be on the [Green Party](#) website soon, but I do want to urge Saanich-Gulf Island folks to attend our Sidney event. Our amazing local volunteers have put together a movie event with a terrific panel to follow. We will be showing the documentary from [Stand.Earth: *Fracking the Peace at the Star Cinema in Sidney on Earth Day, April 22 at 4 pm.*](#) The panel that follows will be moderated by our brilliant Green MLA **Adam Olsen**, and features author and journalist **Ben Parfitt** and **Gilles Wendling**. Please get your [tickets here now](#).

I will be spending Earth Day in Edmonton to support the Green Party of Alberta. Leader Jordan Wilkie is a dynamo – firefighter, Green deep thinker, and hard worker! The Alberta Greens are now in 3rd place in the polls leading up to the May 29 provincial election. I will also be speaking by Zoom to Greens in Nova Scotia and elsewhere. Still, I am sad to miss being at the Star with Adam and so many wonderful friends.

On this morning, I am finally going to share the news from the *Mass Casualty Commission Report*. This week will mark the third anniversary of the horrific events that stretched from Portapique through to the outskirts of Halifax over one hundred and twenty kilometres away. Twenty-two people were killed, making it Canada’s worst mass shooting event. Spread out over thirteen hours, the RCMP bungled, failed to warn and fired on [local people who were sheltering at a fire station!](#)

I start with my own experiences of the Nova Scotia RCMP when I lived in rural Cape Breton. One late night in 1979, my parents were awakened by the phone. My father took the call and sleepily told my mother that the neighbours had called to say our barn was on fire. Not seeing any flames through the window, he pulled on his jacket over his pjs and headed out to check. Once in the barn he saw a fire in each corner. He called 911, raised the alarm and all of us were up and running with buckets of water. We nearly had put the fire out when we ran out of water. Our water line had been cut.

A few days later we had an anonymous call – “The barn was a warning! Your house and business are next!” To which my mom, unintimidated, replied, “Do you think we are stupid?! We know it was a warning!”

Our business was a restaurant on an old schooner. The neighbours, who, to put it mildly, had not supported my work fighting insecticide forest spraying, had just opened their own restaurant.

We did not see them as competition but obviously, they wanted to force us out. We had moved to Margaree from the US five years before. I will never forget the “help” we received from the local RCMP detachment. “We recommend you people move back to the United States. We cannot protect you here.” They refused to pursue arson charges.

We were completely financially strapped and had no way to move to the US, even if we had wanted to. We moved, but only out of sight, across the river and into the woods. Later, the same fellow burned down the house we had been renting. His extended family had moved in, and arson was used to retaliate in a family dispute. No charges there either.

As I read the *Mass Casualty Commission* report I realized that my experience of the RCMP was not an exception to the rule. The Commission details the many failures of the RCMP, as well as the Canadian Border Services Agency, over many years. “There were many warning signs of the perpetrator’s violence and missed opportunities to intervene in the years before the mass casualty. There were also gaps and errors in the critical incident response to the mass casualty as it unfolded on April 18 and 19, 2020.”

The perpetrator, Gabriel Wortman (described in the report as “wealthy” and “white” dentist) had been a victim of family violence throughout his childhood. As an adult, he inflicted violence on people around him for years, especially his partner, the first person he tried to kill that night.

The wife of Greg Blair, the first person he killed, managed to hide her children in the house before using her landline to call 911. At a few minutes after 10 pm on April 18, Jamie Blair gave the 911 operator critical information – the name of the killer and that he had look-alike RCMP cars and many guns. He killed her within minutes and set the house on fire. None of what she relayed, so bravely exposing herself to harm by making that call, was shared with the public. It is torment to wonder how many lives would have been saved if people had been warned.

The children continued to hide until the smoke got too bad. They ran to a neighbour’s house where two other children were home, not knowing their parents, who had left to get help, had been killed on the road.

The RCMP officers were not from the area. Their cell phones did not have data, so they were lost in the dark. They thought they had blocked the only road, but if anyone local had been listened to, RCMP would have known the route Wortman would be taking was wide open. The

RCMP allowed the killer to leave the area and failed to warn the public there was an active shooter at large driving a look-alike RCMP vehicle. Inexplicably, they operated on the assumption that the killer was dead somewhere in the woods.

[Journalist Stephen Maher](#) covered the events as they occurred. In his clear and compelling opinion piece, he noted multiple failures: “The RCMP failed to call in the Truro police for help, failed to send an emergency alert that would have saved lives, shot up a fire hall where victims were sheltering, and, most terribly, failed to find the perpetrator for 12 hours.”

Not all individual officers failed, but the RCMP leadership also failed their officers. Corporal Heidi Stevenson was brave and diligent. I knew Heidi. She was strong, beautiful, and full of community spirit. Her mom is a dear friend, a Green Party volunteer from when we lived near each other. The killer’s fake RCMP car had a reinforced bumper that acted as a battering ram. He ran his car directly into Heidi’s, forcing her out of it and into an exchange of gunfire in which she was killed.

Wortman’s many guns, his having several fake RCMP cars, his violent assaults over many years, his making threats, and his beating his intimate partner were all reported to the RCMP. And over and over again, over years, different RCMP officers chose to believe the perpetrator.

The Canadian Border Service Agency missed critical red flags as the perpetrator brought weapons into Canada. He was, after all, a wealthy white man with a Nexus card.

Contrast that with the armed-to-the-teeth special unit, the Community-Industry Response Group, violating the Charter by creating “exclusion zones” at Fairy Creek and on Wet’suwet’en territory – keeping reporters from witnessing the brutal and violent treatment of non-violent land defenders and Indigenous people. *The Mass Casualty Commission* report and its focus on gender-based violence echoes the *Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2S+ Peoples*. Most recommendations from that inquiry continue to gather dust.

In 2018, the RCMP Civilian Complaints Commission issued a scathing report on the sexual abuse of Indigenous girls by officers in the Prince George detachment. The RCMP sat on the report for more than two years before giving it to BC Solicitor General Mike Farnworth in 2021. Farnworth has now kicked it down the road with a new investigation. [Jan Mulgrew in the Vancouver Sun](#) has called this out, “The report a decade ago concluded a group of officers in the same detachment, during the same time as allegations in this case, fatally tasered a hog-tied prisoner and that it was covered up in the same fashion.”

Meanwhile, a report issued this week from Thunder Bay echoes the *Mass Casualty Commission* report in saying change is urgently needed in that community. The police in Thunder Bay are not RCMP, they are local police, but that police force has also been ignoring

complaints of mistreatment of Indigenous peoples and failures to investigate reports of race-based violence. The epidemic of gender and race-based violence is not restricted to Nova Scotia, nor to the RCMP.

[The Globe and Mail editorial last Saturday](#) concluded “Canada’s national police force needs to be torn down to its foundations and then those foundations need to be dynamited.”

Amen to that. But the whole question of how we police and the urgent need for transformational change extends beyond the RCMP. Some local policing is exemplary. Local policing in our area (Victoria, Saanich and Sooke) is attuned to de-escalation, protection of human rights, and rapid response in dangerous situations. We need to seek out and replicate best practice. We are facing a new wave of horrific crimes – stabbing young people on public transit in random events across Canada. These attacks appear to be connected to the lack of mental health supports. They may be connected to pandemic isolation. Less policing is not something political leaders will champion, but better policing is an urgent priority.

I will be back in Parliament tomorrow, hoping to find ways to ensure this report and the many before it, are no longer ignored. Meanwhile, [please sign the petition E-4266 \(Justice\)](#). It is an attempt to create better protections for those living near people who threaten violence. It closes for signature on April 26.

Many thanks and have a great Earth Day, April 22 – next Saturday!

Love,

Elizabeth