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Commissioner's appointment is likely a very wise move

If history is a guide, the recent appointment of William Elliott as the first civilian commissioner of the RCMP in the force's 173-year history was a wise move.

The career bureaucrat, who will enter the force's top job armed with Prime Minister Stephen Harper's backing to shake up a force that has been rocked by scandal, quickly acknowledged that he faces a challenge to get rank-and-file Mounties' support.

The appointment of a senior bureaucrat who began his government career as a Tory aide immediately provoked controversy within the Mounties and among some political opponents who questioned his lack of police experience and ties to Ottawa's halls of power.

However, there was an interesting precedent for the appointment 44 years ago, when then attorney general Fred Cass responded to scandals of a different sort within the OPP by appointing a member of his own staff to head the force.

Eric Silk, a Shelburne native who had spent most of his legal career within the AG's ministry, was given the task of reorganizing the force. In the 10 years that followed, the OPP was modernized, with new detachment offices springing up just about everywhere and morale improving noticeably.

Significantly, Silk, who died in November 2004 at 96, is to this day the only civilian to have headed the police force and yet is remembered as one of its best, if not the best, commissioners in its long history.

An interesting brief testimonial can be found on a *guest book* entry on the OPP Association's Web site. The June 11, 2004, e-mail from Stu Radke of Elmvale reads: "Retired Commissioner Eric Silk has to go down in the History of Policing as one of the Greatest. He led the OPP from yesterday into tomorrow and did it by not having ever been a Police Officer. It was contrary to popular belief at the time. This was done with foresight and also learning about what did happen at each detachment by going there and talking to each officer. I am proud to have served under him, as were others."

At his first encounter with the Ottawa media, the new RCMP commissioner acknowledged that there "are certainly challenges. I don't wear rose-coloured glasses.

And certain members of the RCMP have expressed their wish to have a commissioner from inside."

However, he believes RCMP members will "pull together" to make the force better, but that he will have to rely more on professional police officers because he is not a cop.

"That is a challenge that my predecessors did not face. But I also believe strongly that I bring other experience and other skills to bear, and I think we can be a good combination."

Harper turned to Elliott after the government-appointed investigator into the RCMP's pension-fund scandal, David Brown, described the force's paramilitary management structure as "horribly broken" and outdated.

It's the first time since the RCMP, initially called the North West Mounted Police, was formed in 1873 that a commissioner was chosen from outside the uniformed ranks of the military or police.

Elliott assumed the commissioner's position July 16, filling a job left open last December when former commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli resigned under fire over conflicting testimony in the Maher Arar affair.

Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day said Elliott's political and management experience is needed to guide an organization with 24,000 police officers and employees to a new era. He has indicated a task force charged with revamping the force, including creating a civilian-oversight body, will be struck soon.

"This is a time of transition. A time when somebody with the management skills and the experience that Mr. Elliott has is going to be required in this particular position as commissioner," Day told reporters.

Although the RCMP has long been one of Canada's most respected institutions, it has been tarnished by a series of controversies.

Although Elliott's government and political background might be seen as posing a threat to the arm's-length status of the national police force, no such problem ever surfaced during Commissioner Silk's 10-year tenure at the OPP, and Elliott insisted that he will be a guardian of the force's independence.



Our Readers Write

Hoy off the mark on MMP

In his editorial "Voter education more important than system" (Citizen, July 11) Claire Hoy unfortunately misrepresents the proposed MMP election system. He attempts to argue that many politicians "won't be elected but instead will be chosen from a list or party 'representatives' chosen in the back rooms of the political parties themselves." Obviously, Hoy has not read or understood the Citizen's Assembly report. If he had, he

Speed limits should remain

The editorial on the Caledon Citizen July 4 ("Political" speed laws are a big part of the problem) clearly illustrates the main reason for the large number of traffic accidents in the Town of Caledon.

By referring to our country roads as "rural highways" the writer reveals his lack of understanding of driving in a rural setting. I suspect he is not alone. Most commuters travelling through our community are probably former city dwellers who have experienced only two types only two types of driving: stop and go, or 140 km/h on a 400 series highway.

A thin layer of asphalt on a narrow country road does not make a highway. Hazards such as hills, valleys, sharp turns, hidden driveways, deep ditches, joggers, cyclists, farm machinery, school buses and four-way stops make these roads much more challenging than driving half asleep on the 400 on cruise control.

Two years ago, our stretch of "rural highway" known as Mount Hope Road, was in such bad shape from too much heavy traffic that drivers either abandoned it or actually drove slower. Until it was patched up, it was safer for joggers, cyclists and sensible driver, but if speed limits are raised to "provincial" highway levels, the accidents will increase.

Arthur Downey
Caledon

would understand that list MPPs would be 100% elected by the public - people on the lists would **only** win seats if the public specifically votes for their party. The only difference in MMP is that the public would vote for a group of representatives, instead of for an individual.

However, the most important point that is missed by Hoy is that before the election, not only do the party lists have to be published, but the **method** used to select the members on the list **also** has to be published. What political party in their right mind would publicly publish the fact that they held secret back room meetings to handpick party hacks for their list? Not only would voters be turned off, but the other parties would joyfully be able to accuse the offending party of being undemocratic. The far more realistic scenario would be that political party members would hold democratic elections amongst themselves to select the representatives for their party list. This is exactly what happens in the many countries using an MMP election system.

Darryl Bandoro

Hoy is misinformed

Mr. Hoy's article on the proposed new electoral system, MMP, is full of misinformation and I recommend that every voter inform themselves on the issue with less biased sources than him. I do have to take up one of his points. He mentions list candidates chosen in the "back rooms" of parties. How are political candidates chosen now? In a free, transparent and open process? Definitely not. The worst abuse is the parachuting of candidates into ridings they don't live in, such as happened with Michael Ignatieff. In fact, parties will be required to reveal to Elections Ontario what process they used and voters have the same right to scrutinize their choices.

Mr. Hoy, get informed.

Joyce Hall

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