

OUR LAND IS OUR FUTURE

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Vancouver Police Board
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Via Email: office@vancouverpoliceboard.ca

OPEN LETTER: Vancouver Police Board Must Provide Immediate and Rigorous Oversight of BMO's and VPD's Racist Mistreatment of Indigenous Man and Granddaughter

Dear Vancouver Police Board,

It has been one month since an Indigenous man and his twelve-year-old granddaughter were racially profiled and wrongly handcuffed at a Bank of Montreal (BMO) branch in Vancouver. Maxwell Johnson and his granddaughter, Tori-Anne, were subject to an appalling and traumatizing display of racism, one with roots in Canada's colonial history of institutionalized discrimination and violence towards Indigenous peoples. In the days since, public statements by BMO have minimized the incident, framing it as "unfortunate" or as a learning opportunity.

The Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) strongly condemns the actions and inadequate, superficial responses of BMO and the Vancouver Police Department (VPD). UBCIC calls on the Vancouver Police Board to provide its own thorough review of the case with the civilian oversight and governance it necessitates. Further, the UBCIC calls on the Vancouver Police Board to release the transcript of the call that BMO made to the VPD regarding Maxwell Johnson and Tori-Anne, as a matter of public interest. We are aware that the Vancouver Police Board will be listening to the audio of that call this afternoon.

To be criminalized and met with suspicion for simply opening a bank account is deplorable; it speaks to the prejudice and intolerance that pervades all levels of the society, and that the BMO and VPD have become enabling agents of. For Indigenous people to be labelled as 'threats' or 'criminals' by institutions based on their presence alone demonstrates the critical need for corporations and law enforcement

agencies to not only be held accountable for racist misconduct, but for them to actively acknowledge and understand the lived experiences of Indigenous people. They need to exercise empathy and sensitivity and understand that the undue harm, trauma, fear, and humiliation they inflicted upon Maxwell Johnson and Tori-Anne is salt on a wound that spans generations. For an Indigenous child to be handcuffed and forced to witness her grandfather be wrongfully arrested re-enacts the horrific violence that defined the Indian Residential School System and the intergenerational trauma that stemmed from it. Johnson has spoken to how his treatment recalled the memories of Indigenous children being taken away from their families by the RCMP. This event further cements in the eyes of Indigenous people in B.C. how police act as colonizers, symbols of Indigenous subjugation.

The wrongful arrest of Johnson and Tori-Anne follows on the heels of the BC Human Rights Tribunal's ruling that VPD officers discriminated against an Indigenous mother, Deborah Campbell, in 2016 when they physically and roughly blocked her from the arrest of her son. Just as with the Johnson and his granddaughter, the VPD reinforced harmful Indigenous stereotypes and used racial profiling to discount the validity of Campbell's emotions and to position her not a concerned mother, but as an unruly nuisance.

The experiences of both Tori-Anne and Deborah Campbell also represent the lack of safety and ongoing oppression experienced by Indigenous women and girls at the hands of police. Numerous reports and public statements, including the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls have highlighted this discrimination and called upon police forces for immediate systemic shifts to address the issue. In a society where Indigenous women and girls continue to be exploited, abused and murdered at alarming rates, it is unacceptable and deeply disturbing that the standard police response in these situations is to immediately treat Indigenous women and young girls as criminals.

In light of these disturbing and persistent incidences of racism and injustice, the UBCIC calls upon the Vancouver Police Board address the following concerns with an impartial, independent review of VPD and BMO member and staff conduct:

1. The VPD's response to the situation, that they acted according to "standard operating procedure," has been inadequate, lacking the sensitivity and awareness of the racist dynamics at play that have been present within policing culture since the inception of colonialism.
2. The BMO's failure to obtain further information before reporting the supposed "fraud" is fundamentally racial profiling; their refusal to discuss the full account of what was said and what transpired during their reporting is also deeply troubling.
3. A lack of empathy and understanding that Maxwell Johnson's pre-existing panic disorder and anxiety was exacerbated by the actions of the BMO staff and police, and that further trauma for

him and his granddaughter will occur and is a result of a legacy of police negligence and mistreatment of Indigenous peoples.

4. The Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner has appointed the Delta Police Department to investigate the incident, and while an investigation is crucial, this poses a conflict of interest for police to be investigating their own on a matter of misconduct and racism.

It is not enough to have half-hearted apologies and promises of “moving forward” and “learning.” We want concrete action – a transparent civilian review of Johnson’s case by the Vancouver Police Board, and a true understanding of how this event will remain in Tori-Anne’s mind as an indelible memory of confusion, fear, and shame. She will remember how she and her grandfather were singled out and dealt injustice based on a debilitating framework of racism.

We ask that the transcript of the BMO call to the VPD be made public because we believe it is a matter of public interest. The public needs to know what was said in order to have an informed conversation and dialogue, and to work toward collectively and concretely addressing racism. Ultimately, with every incident of discrimination made public, there are promises made that it will not happen again. These promises mean little without the systemic change to counter the racism that built these institutions.

On behalf of the UNION OF BC INDIAN CHIEFS



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