August 29, 2024

Submission to the Public Order Policy Consultation

To the Toronto Police Service Board:

Thank you for allowing me to share my perspective on the issue of policing public protests/demonstrations. I recognize the challenge this poses since freedom of expression and assembly are essential to our democratic society.

These past months have demonstrated the ease with which the right to protest/demonstrate can be misappropriated and turned into a perceived right to intimidate and harass. Slogan-chanting crowds targeting neighbourhoods, schools, community buildings, places of worship, businesses, and even hospitals they believe are “complicit” with a political position or ideology they oppose – as we have seen in Toronto since October 7, 2023 – are not seeking to influence government policy, or even sway public opinion. There are recognized places and spaces in the city that have long been used for those purposes. The goal is clearly to inconvenience and harass, to intimidate, to isolate, and to stigmatize. That should never be considered a legitimate use of our democratic rights.

It is essential for the Toronto Police Service to have clear guidelines for intervening, and ending, public actions such as the ones I’ve described. I recognize that the issue is complex and that competing freedoms and rights need to be balanced. But the communal life of the entire city is degraded and damaged when such actions are tolerated. And we have unfortunately seen too many examples of the escalation that results when they are tolerated: vandalism, physical violence, death threats.

I am extremely grateful for everything the TPS has done over these last challenging months to ensure the safety and well-being of all Torontonians. Thank you for this opportunity to share my concerns with you.

Beth Herst, PhD