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# The Structural Deficit in Canadian Police Governance

## *Why Training Cannot Fix a Broken Framework - and What Must Change*

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**Publication Note:** This discussion brief draws on research by the author and colleagues at the Community Safety Knowledge Alliance (CSKA). A manuscript, *“Back Off, That’s Operational: Police Culture, Structural Deficits, and the Crisis of Civilian Governance,”* has been submitted for publication in the *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* and is currently under review. This brief is a stand-alone companion piece prepared for the Police Governance Ontario conference and does not reproduce the manuscript.

### THE CHALLENGE

Police boards across Canada bear full public accountability for the adequacy and effectiveness of local policing. Yet they operate within a framework that is out of sync with the complexity of what they are asked to govern. The policing environment is shifting rapidly and outpacing the capabilities and capacities of many police agencies: organized crime, cybercrime, artificial intelligence, and complex social issues including addictions, mental health, and housing instability demand multi-disciplinary responses that now extend well beyond traditional policing mandates. Combined, these trends place significant and unprecedented expectations on the police and on the boards charged with governing them – complexities and expectations that the current governance framework was never designed to meet.

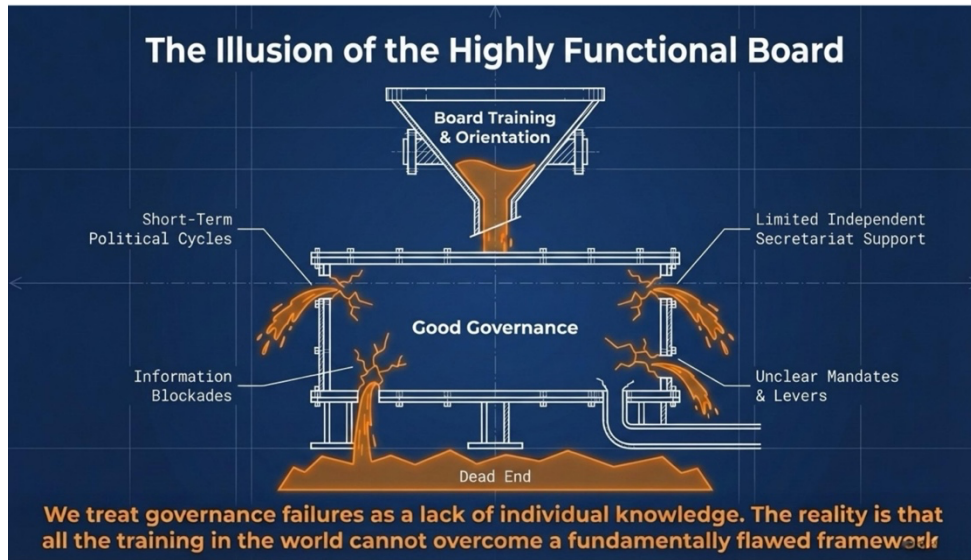
Over the past decade, a succession of landmark public inquiries [including the Morden Report (2012), Senator Sinclair’s investigation of the Thunder Bay Police Services Board (2018), the Rouleau Commission on the Ottawa convoy crisis (2022), and the Nova Scotia Mass Casualty Commission (2023)] arrived at strikingly similar conclusions about systemic failures in civilian police governance. These are not isolated incidents. They are the predictable symptoms of a governance model that has not kept pace with modern policing.

The reflex response - more training and better orientation for board members - is well-intentioned, but largely misguided. Research found that over 71% of Canadian board members received fewer than 10 hours of related training annually<sup>1</sup>, and that even where expert training was provided (as in Thunder Bay following the 2018 Sinclair Review), it proved largely ineffective<sup>2</sup>. The reason is simple: training cannot repair a broken framework.

<sup>1</sup> Hodgkinson, et al. (2023)

<sup>2</sup> Independent Expert Panel to the Thunder Bay Police Services Board (2023)

Figure 1. The structural leaks that training cannot fill.



### THREE DEEP FRACTURES IN THE CANADIAN POLICE GOVERNANCE MODEL

There are three key structural shortfalls at the heart of the governance dysfunction. Together they weaken the board relative to the police service, and in doing so, undermine the very principle of civilian oversight.

"Weaponized" Operational Independence	Chronic Under-Resourcing	Flawed Governance Architecture
<p>This quasi-constitutional doctrine designed to protect policing from political interference has been routinely misapplied/misunderstood.</p> <p>Consequence: often block legitimate board oversight of finance, strategy, and policy - creating 'lame-duck' boards with formal accountability but little real authority.</p>	<p>Boards overseeing budgets exceeding \$100 million routinely operate with secretariat funding as low as \$14,000 and without independent legal counsel, research capacity, or communications staff.</p> <p>Boards cannot govern without the necessary infrastructure to do so.</p>	<p>Short terms tied to election cycles, opaque appointment processes, and the absence of skills-based competency frameworks systematically undermine the institutional memory and expertise that effective governance demands.</p>
<p><i>Designed to keep politics out of policing – misunderstood and misused to keep boards out too.</i></p>	<p><i>Accountability without resources is performance – not governance.</i></p>	<p><i>Short terms. Flawed appointment processes. No memory. A design for perpetual dysfunction.</i></p>

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## FRACTURE 1: OPERATIONAL INDEPENDENCE WEAPONIZED AS A SHIELD

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Police operational independence is a quasi-constitutional doctrine, established through superior court decisions including the Supreme Court of Canada’s ruling in *R. v. Campbell (1999)*. It insulates specific investigative and law enforcement decisions from political interference. It does not, and was never intended to, shield police executives from board oversight of finance, strategy, or organizational culture.

*“I have seen police operational independence weaponized - it’s basically the same ‘back off’ even on strategy... ‘No, that’s operations, you can’t put a strategy in place.’”*

— Former Deputy Chief of a major Canadian police service (interviewed by author, 2022)

In practice, however, the doctrine has been frequently misapplied. When a board requests financial or operational data to fulfill its governance mandate, the police sometimes label the request “operational” and refuse. Boards, unclear on the doctrine and fearful of violating the law, often stand down<sup>3</sup>. The result is what the Rouleau Commission described as **widespread paralysis**: elected officials, board members, and senior public servants unsure of what they were legally permitted to ask.

The problem is not operational independence itself - the principle is essential to the rule of law. The problem is its weaponization and the institutional fearfulness it has cultivated. Reform must clarify the doctrine’s proper scope in provincial legislation.

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## FRACTURE 2: BIG BUDGETS, BARE-BONES GOVERNANCE

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Police boards routinely oversee organizations with budgets exceeding \$100 million while their own secretariat funding can amount to as little as \$14,000 annually. Most boards operate without dedicated secretariat staff, independent legal counsel, research capacity, or communications support.

The consequences are predictable. Boards that rely on the municipality for legal advice cannot receive independent counsel on matters involving the municipality itself. Boards that depend on the police service for strategic or financial planning support give up the very independence that defines their purpose. Without independent capacity, boards can be structurally reduced to responding to whatever the chief presents, rather than proactively setting direction and holding the service to account.

The Nova Scotia Mass Casualty Commission and the Sinclair Review both recommended that municipalities provide adequate, statutory funding to police boards - a recommendation that remains broadly unimplemented. Governance infrastructure is not a luxury; it is an operational necessity. While Section 50 (1) of Ontario’s *Community Safety and Policing Act* provides that municipalities “...shall provide the board with sufficient funding to, (a) comply with this Act and the regulations, and (b) pay the expenses of the board’s operation...”, it falls short of establishing a standard or providing meaningful guidance on what “sufficient” requires in practice.

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<sup>3</sup> See Rouleau (2023), Roach (2023), Corley et al. (2025)

The Act does not differentiate, for example, between the secretariat support appropriate for a small municipal police agency and that required a mid-sized one. There is no formula nor should there be a rigid one, but the current absence of benchmarks leaves municipalities to interpret the obligation on their own. Furthermore, it leaves boards without any meaningful recourse when that interpretation falls far short of what effective governance requires. Providing greater legislative clarity on minimum expectations, scaled to size and complexity, should be an achievable expectation.

### **FRACTURE 3: A GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE THAT KEEPS BOARDS INEFFECTIVE**

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How boards are constituted can undermine the accrual of expertise and institutional memory that complex governance requires. Terms as short as one (e.g., Saskatchewan) to two years, tied to election cycles, mean that just as members develop meaningful knowledge and competence, they rotate out. Meanwhile, appointment processes lack transparency and almost universally fail to apply skills-based competency frameworks.

Compounding this is the practice of mayors and councillors assuming board leadership roles. While elected officials have a legitimate place on boards, their assuming the role of Chair or Vice-Chair blurs the essential distinction between the municipality as funder and the board as an independent governing body. The Independent Expert Panel for the Thunder Bay Police Services Board recommended that the Chair should be a citizen member. This was precisely to preserve the board's independence.

Many boards also meet on fixed monthly schedules of nine or ten times per year, a cadence potentially adequate for routine oversight but insufficient when fast-moving events demand timely and incisive engagement.

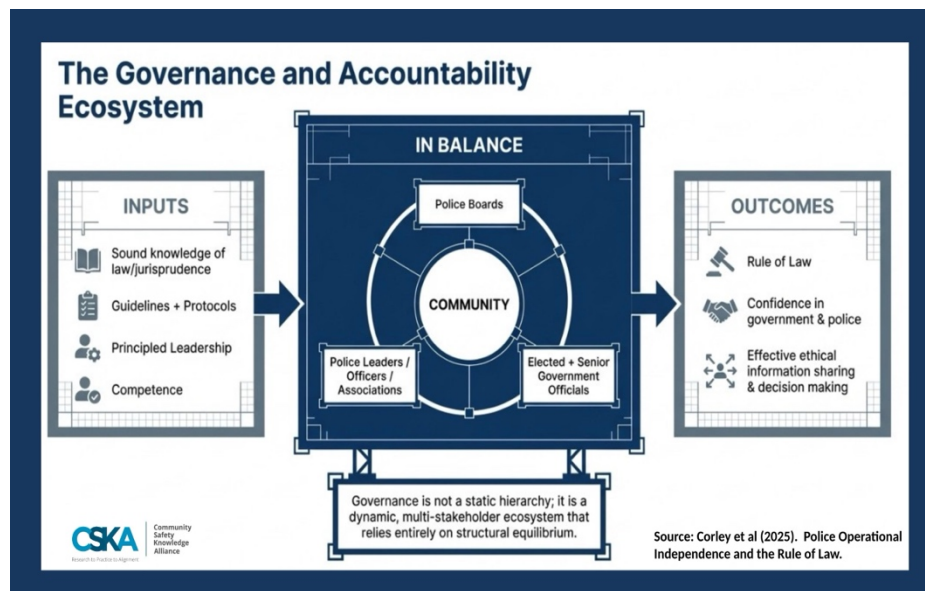
The current design simultaneously undermines independence and perpetuates inexperience.

### **THE GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY ECOSYSTEM**

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Police governance does not operate in a vacuum. CSKA research describes a “governance and accountability ecosystem” - a dynamic network of police boards, police leadership, elected officials, and community stakeholders (See Figure 2). When this ecosystem is in balance, it upholds the rule of law, sustains public trust, and supports ethical decision-making. The three structural deficits described above consistently knock it out of balance, and always in the same direction: weakening the governing board relative to the police service.

Figure 2. The Governance and Accountability Ecosystem



Source: Corley et al. (2025), "Police Operational Independence and the Rule of Law." *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being*.

## FROM OPERATIONAL INDEPENDENCE TO OPERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The way forward requires a conceptual and legislative shift: from the current confusion around operational independence toward a clearly codified principle of operational responsibility. The distinction is crucial: police do not require board permission before making specific operational decisions, since that would constitute the interference the doctrine is designed to prevent. But the police must be fully accountable to the board after the fact for explaining those decisions, their outcomes, and their implications for policy and community values.

Equally important, operational independence does not prohibit proactive consultation and information sharing between police and board. To the contrary, as Justice Morden (2012) made clear, a rigid separation between "policy" and "operations" is neither legally required nor practically sound. Boards can and should be briefed on significant upcoming operations, engage on objectives and priorities, and offer recommendations - while the chief retains full authority over tactical and operational execution.

Boards are the legitimate democratic authority responsible for ensuring that local policing is effective, ethical, and community aligned.

## A BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM: FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROVINCIAL ASSOCIATIONS

The reforms required are systemic and must be pursued simultaneously. Half-measures on any single dimension will not produce sustainable change. The following recommendations are directed to provincial police service board associations, with a potential coordinating role for the Canadian Association of Police Governance (CAPG).

#1

**Build the Coalition** (within 12 months)

Establish a permanent *Governance Reform Working Group* of willing boards to develop a common structural reform agenda and advocate for legislative amendments at the provincial level.

#2

**Develop Model Legislation** (within 18 months)

Create a model *Police Governance Modernization Bill* codifying operational responsibility, statutory minimum funding for board secretariats, and skills-based staggered board appointments. Provide the full package to the provincial Ministry.

#3

**Commission Strategic Case Studies** (ongoing)

Publish 2 to 3 short case studies annually documenting how governance structures have constrained oversight, agency effectiveness, and community safety outcomes. This will support evidence-informed advocacy.

#4

**Establish Data and Information Rights Protocols** (within 18 months)

Negotiate a province-wide protocol affirming boards' right to operational data and information for strategic governance. The principle that boards need data to govern should be codified, not left to the discretion of individual police agencies.

#5

**Create a Competency-Based Appointment Framework** (within 12 months)

Adapt the Winnipeg Police Board's competency matrix (or equivalent) to provide a standardized framework for board appointments, and urge provincial and municipal appointment processes to align with it. Skills-based governance begins with skills-based selection.

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## CONCLUSION

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Canadian policing is entering an era of unprecedented complexity. This will demand more of its governance institutions, not less. Today, highly capable and committed people are recruited to serve on police boards and then denied the tools, infrastructure, and authorities they need to succeed. That is not fair to them, and it is not fair to the communities who depend on those boards doing their job.

Strengthening civilian police governance is a pragmatic investment in the legitimacy and long-term sustainability of policing in Canada. Police leaders, board members, municipal and provincial officials, front-line officers, and the communities they serve all benefit when boards are structurally equipped to do what the legislation already expects of them. The status quo is no longer an option.

*“We are long past the point of merely coping with a broken system. It is time to insist on a professional model that aligns with the complexity and stakes of modern policing.”*

— Cal Corley, “Back Off, That’s Operational” (manuscript submitted, 2026)

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## AI DISCLOSURE

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The author used Perplexity AI for editing purposes during the preparation of this report. The author reviewed and edited the content as necessary and takes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of this discussion paper.

## ABOUT CSKA

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The Community Safety Knowledge Alliance (CSKA) is a Canadian non-profit applied research organization dedicated to supporting leaders in policing, public health and human services. We focus on developing, implementing and assessing innovative strategies to enhance community safety and well-being service delivery and outcomes.

Independence and objectivity are central to CSKA's identify. Our success is continuously built on upholding **these values** and having respectful relationships with clients and stakeholders. This approach enables us to maintain a professional balance between independent, evidence-based perspectives and effective collaboration.

For more information on CSKA, please visit [www.cskacanada.ca](http://www.cskacanada.ca) or contact CEO, Cal Corley, at 613-297-6728 or by email at [ccorley@cskacanada.ca](mailto:ccorley@cskacanada.ca)

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**Cal Corley** is the CEO of CSKA, a role he has held for the past 11 years. He is a former Assistant Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. From 2008-2014, he was head of the Canadian Police College and during that time also served as the RCMP's Senior Envoy to Mexico and the Americas.

Over the course of his career, Cal gained extensive domestic and international experience in both operations and executive leadership, serving in such areas as community policing, major crime, drug enforcement, national security, criminal intelligence, strategic planning, human resources and leading major reform initiatives. He also served on secondments at the Privy Council Office's Security and Intelligence Secretariat, and at Public Safety Canada.