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The speech Saunders should have given: Keenan

Columnist Edward Keenan suggests an alternative speech to address a developing crisis in public trust.

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AARON VINCENT ELKAIM / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Chief Mark Saunders, faced with responding this week to both the guilty verdict in the James Forcillo trial and the arrest of four officers, could have said more to restore faith in the police force, Edward Keenan suggests.

By: **Edward Keenan** Columnist, Published on Fri Jan 29 2016

Given the recent spate of high-profile incidents, controversies and reports that could undermine public trust in the police force, Toronto Police Chief Mark Saunders' Thursday press conference did little to directly address public concern. Here, columnist Edward Keenan suggests an alternative speech for a developing crisis.

Good morning. At seven o'clock this morning, four Toronto police officers were arrested and charged with a total of nine counts of obstruct justice and eight counts of perjury. Their names and the details will be in a press release you'll receive shortly.

I want to emphasize that the investigation into this behaviour was led by my office, and the charges against them are a result of that investigation. We take any threat to the integrity of our work seriously. And make no mistake, the behaviour they are charged with represents a direct assault on policing in this city — a gross violation of one person's rights, but also undermining the hard work and reputation of thousands of their fellow officers, violating a sacred trust that is placed in us as public servants and in so doing ultimately jeopardizing public safety.

The officers involved have been suspended, with pay as the legislation governing us requires, and they are entitled to the presumption of innocence until they have their day in court. But there should be no doubt that the things they stand accused of are things that will not be tolerated or defended by this police force. Our officers need to know that, and the public needs to know that.

Let me speak directly to the public in saying that they and I both know that these charges come at a time when the public may be questioning its trust in our department. Earlier

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this week, a jury found one of our officers guilty of attempted murder. Another of our officers is going to a tribunal, alleged to have discharged his weapon improperly in a public place. We have been under intense questioning for more than a year because our investigative tools — I'm talking about carding — have led large portions of the public to believe we think it is our job to harass them when they are doing nothing wrong. That we are violating their rights. That our presence in their communities makes them less safe. We in the force now understand they have good reasons to believe that. That's a massive failure for this department.

We can do better, we will do better.

And let me talk to my own officers, who may feel besieged or threatened by the level of public concern over recent events. I know that the vast, overwhelming majority of you conduct yourselves with honesty, integrity and professionalism every single day on the job. Which is why we, as a force, need to confront the things some individuals may have done wrong so they don't smear all of us. It's also why we need to acknowledge the things we as a force can do better.

If there are officers who think perjury or attempted murder are actions they need to defend, then I'd invite them to consider a different line of work. But to the bulk of the officers who, like me, think such actions are unacceptable and toxic, I will say we will continue to provide you with better training, more resources and more tools to work with us and the community you serve, to ensure that everyone is safer, and that we can better ensure a more just society.

This job, this calling we have accepted, "To Serve and Protect" the people of Toronto, is a difficult one, a stressful one, and very often a dangerous one, for us and for those we're trying to help. There's a temptation to feel like all the second-guessing and scrutiny means people are against us. That any criticism of police behaviour is *anti-police* and that any acknowledgment we make of the legitimacy of some of that criticism feeds an attack on all of us.

But that is not the case. The job we volunteered for comes with great responsibility and with great authority. And those things need to come with great accountability. We need to welcome that accountability, in the form of public scrutiny and criticism. Often that scrutiny will prove to people that we are doing well. When it does not, we can use the criticism to help us do better.

To everyone in this city, I want to address one final thing, a so-called controversy about comments my Deputy Chief, Peter Sloy, made about changes that are needed in this department. Everyone should know there is no controversy: When Deputy Chief Sloy says we need to modernize, he's reflecting the work we're doing — and will be doing more quickly — inside the force right now. When Deputy Sloy says we're confronting a crisis in public trust that has arisen not just here but across North America, he speaks for himself, but he's acknowledging a truth we all recognize, and one Peter and I and the rest of the command are wrestling with together.

Because our job *depends* on public trust. If the community does not trust us, they will not co-operate with us, or call on us, and our job becomes virtually impossible. We become less safe. Everyone becomes less safe. And those most vulnerable to crime are doubly victimized if their mistrust leads them to feel they have no recourse to authorities. That is not acceptable, and I don't believe it's justified. But where people have reasons to feel that way, we need to fix it.

Toronto is one of the safest cities in North America, and the excellent work of thousands of police officers has helped to ensure that's the case. We have not been, and we will not be, perfect — we're human beings, after all. But we need to get better, much better, at addressing the ways we're falling short.

That involves working with the public, listening to them, talking with them, welcoming their scrutiny — and their cameras — and holding ourselves to a standard of conduct befitting the essential role we have accepted as guardians of peace and order in our community. The charges laid this morning reflect just one part of our commitment to holding ourselves accountable.

People of Toronto: Your police force is here to serve and protect you. We will continue to work with you to serve and protect you better. We need your trust, and we will work to earn it every day.

Edward Keenan writes on city issues ekeenan@thestar.ca. Follow: @thekeenanwire

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