



THUNDER BAY

Senator Murray Sinclair to investigate Thunder Bay Police Services Board

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Canada's leading Indigenous jurist has been tapped to investigate the troubled state of policing in Thunder Bay, escalating a leadership crisis in a city whose mayor and police chief are already facing criminal charges.

Senator Murray Sinclair will head up an Ontario Civilian Police Commission (OCPC) probe into the conduct of the Thunder Bay Police Services Board.

He will examine how the board has handled complaints about police investigations into Indigenous deaths.

"The Ontario Civilian Police Commission has serious concerns about the state of civilian police oversight and public confidence in the delivery of police services in Thunder Bay," an OCPC press release states.

The OCPC is the provincial accountability body overseeing police services and their oversight boards.

It announced Mr. Sinclair's appointment on Monday, just three days after Thunder Bay's mayor was charged with extortion and obstruction of justice.

Mr. Sinclair's work will be confined to the actions of Thunder Bay's five-member police board, according to the OCPC press release.

Specifically, the body has three areas of concern: the board's capacity to address concerns about the quality of investigations into Indigenous deaths; recent criminal charges against the police chief; and the board's rejection of public complaints of systemic racism within the police force.

The board's vice-chair, councillor Brian McKinnon, has said there are no facts to support accusations of systemic racism within the force.

Earlier this year, the chair of the police board, Jackie Dojack, was suspended for several days while under investigation by the OCPC.

She was found to have committed an error in judgment in relation to some of the circumstances around the charges against the chief of police, but she did not breach the code of conduct and was allowed to resume her duties.

By law, police boards cannot meddle in the day-to-day operations of the forces they oversee, but they have broad authority to manage and set policing policy.

Thunder Bay's police force has endured years of scrutiny for the way it investigates the deaths of Indigenous people. A lengthy coroner's inquest into the deaths of seven Indigenous youths that concluded last year drew national attention to the issue and temporarily quelled calls for action.

But when the bodies of two more Indigenous teens turned up in city waterways this year, Indigenous leaders began sounding alarms about what they described as a "policing crisis." Chief Alvin Fiddler of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation called for the RCMP to be brought in to investigate the deaths, saying he had lost confidence in the ability of Thunder Bay police to conduct the investigations.

On Monday, Mr. Fiddler called the Sinclair appointment "welcome news" for the 49 Northern Ontario Indigenous communities he represents. "We have great faith in Senator Murray Sinclair to do a thorough job investigating the Thunder Bay Police Service," he said.

Born in Manitoba, Mr. Sinclair became the second Indigenous judge ever appointed in Canada and went on to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Last year, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appointed him to the Senate.

“There’s no doubt that there’s lots of issues that need to be addressed within the Thunder Bay police services,” Mr. Fiddler said. “I hope that his work and his review will be far ranging.”

The quasi-judicial OCPC said it would deliver an interim report by Oct. 31 of this year, with a final report due on March 31, 2018.

The OCPC probe is one of a long list of investigations that have ensnared much of Thunder Bay’s municipal hierarchy. On Friday, the Ontario Provincial Police announced criminal charges against Mayor Keith Hobbs – himself a former Thunder Bay police officer – for alleged extortion and obstruction of an RCMP investigation. He has taken a 90-day leave of absence.

Just two months earlier, the Ontario Provincial Police charged Chief of Police J.P. Levesque with breach of trust and obstructing justice. He’s also on leave. In June, Ontario’s Chief Coroner asked York Regional Police to look at the two most recent deaths. The Thunder Bay police force is also facing investigation by Ontario’s Independent Police Review Director for the way it has investigated deaths involving Indigenous people.