

HIPPIES, YIPPIES, THE COUNTER-CULTURE, AND THE GASTOWN RIOT IN VANCOUVER, 1968-71

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ONE OF THE MORE CONTROVERSIAL protests that occurred in Vancouver during the “long Sixties” was the Gastown Smoke-In and Street Jamboree. Organized by the Yippies – the Youth International Party – the jamboree took place on Saturday, 7 August 1971, in Vancouver’s Gastown district. The smoke-in was intended to be a public display of civil disobedience by Vancouver’s “hippies” and disaffected youth against Canada’s drug laws and a forum within which to denounce the police department’s crackdown on “soft” drugs. As Bryan D. Palmer contends, the “social explosion over drugs is perhaps best indicated” in the smoke-in.¹ But, as a result of the intervention by the police to break up the demonstration, this largely peaceful gathering quickly became a riot, leaving in its wake several people severely hurt, dozens arrested, and thousands of dollars in property damage. An inquiry was convened to investigate the cause of the riot and allegations of police brutality. In the end, the Gastown riot further eroded the already limited trust that many young residents of Vancouver had in their police force. It also exposed the growing chasm between a segment of the city’s population, primarily the young, who demanded social change, and those who wished to preserve the existing social order.

The significance of the Gastown riot is twofold. First, it represents the ongoing efforts of the state, through police brutality and a public inquiry, to quell protests and public debate over social and political issues

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¹ Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada’s 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 498n65.

in an attempt to preserve law and order; second, it illustrates that the social and political dissent of the 1960s in Canada, in addition to the spirit and discourse that underpinned that dissent, did not end with the conclusion of the decade. As Lara Campbell and Dominique Clement assert, ideas and trends from the 1960s transcended this decade. Indeed, the “struggle for a different world” in the “angry seventies” indicates that the fight for social change, which was one of the hallmarks of the 1960s, continued into the early 1970s.²

Gastown, or “Grasstown,” as it had become widely known, was considered by some politicians and the police to be the “soft-drug capital” of Canada. In order to remove the blight of Gastown from the city’s image, and to address the apparent drug problem, the Vancouver police launched Operation Dustpan in July 1971. The primary focus of Operation Dustpan was Gastown.³ Many youths within Gastown’s counterculture community remained defiant in the face of Operation Dustpan and other police intimidation tactics. They were also opposed to what they considered to be unjust drug laws. As one young man told the *Vancouver Sun* following a police raid on the Last Chance Saloon: “At [certain] times in history there have been laws that didn’t make sense. Then people break it until it’s changed.”⁴ The Gastown riot reveals the tensions that existed between, on the one hand, Vancouver’s youth (notably hippies) and the Yippies, which often acted in the name of the city’s alienated youth, and, on the other hand, the Vancouver Police Department and others in Vancouver who felt that the former were a disruptive (and unlawful) societal element. These tensions were created by the negative public images of hippies and by the demonstrations and protests that Yippies and youth staged between 1968 and 1971 to denounce their unfair treatment at the hands of the police and some local businesses.

² Lara Campbell and Dominique Clement, “Introduction: Time, Age, Myth: Towards a History of the Sixties,” in *Debating Dissent: Canada and the Sixties*, ed. Lara Campbell, Dominique Clement, and Gregory S. Kealey, 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012). For more on this point, see Simon Hall, “Protest Movements in the 1970s: The Long 1960s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, 4 (2008): 655-72; and Jeremy Varon, Michael S. Foley, and John McMillian, “Time Is an Ocean: The Past and Future of the Sixties,” *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics, and Culture* 1, 1 (2008): 1-7.

³ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 August 1971.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7 August 1971.

GASTOWN AND THE SPIRIT OF THE SIXTIES

Rebellion, protests, and the struggle for social change are synonymous with the 1960s. The sixties were, according to Bryan D. Palmer, a “pivotal decade,” in part because it was “stamped with dissent, protest, and change.”⁵ The counterculture and protest movements of this decade had a profound impact upon the social and cultural milieu of Canada. One of the most significant aspects of the 1960s was the social activism that flourished within North America. *Time* magazine referred to the protests and social movements of the 1960s as a “youthquake.”⁶ As the editors of the journal *The Sixties* note, no recent decade “has been so powerfully transformative in much of the world.”⁷ In this sense, the 1960s was a decade of hope – hope not just for personal satisfaction but also for social change that would improve the lives of many. Social movements in the sixties confronted individuals and institutions who possessed legal and political power, especially the police and politicians. This anti-authoritarianism has been described as a “vital cultural substate of the sixties.”⁸ Confrontations with institutions and individuals in authority did, at times, lead to violence. Yet, in comparison to the United States, as James Pitsula argues, the 1960s in Canada were generally non-violent.⁹ Nonetheless, the intensity of the era was evident here, as the Gastown riot attests.¹⁰

Underpinning the intensity and the spirit of the 1960s was the counterculture. Doug Owram aptly observes that the counterculture in Canada helped to politicize the non-political. In essence, music, clothing, hair (including beards), language, and drugs became forums that enabled young Canadians, those under the age of thirty, to express themselves and their difference from and opposition to materialism and the culture of conformity that their parents represented and that much of society espoused.¹¹ The counterculture valued “creativity, rebellion, novelty,

⁵ Palmer, *Canada's 1960s*, 5.

⁶ As quoted in Terry H. Anderson, *The Sixties*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 126.

⁷ Varon, Foley, and McMillian, “Time Is an Ocean,” 1.

⁸ Mike Davis, *Dead Cities and Other Tales* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 223.

⁹ James Pitsula, *New World Dawning: The Sixties at Regina Campus* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2008), 16.

¹⁰ This intensity was also on display during the “riot” at Sir George Williams University in Montreal. See Marcel Martel, “‘Riot’ at Sir George Williams: Giving Meaning to Student Dissent,” in *Debating Dissent: Canada and the Sixties*, ed. Lara Campbell, Dominique Clement, and Gregory S. Kealey, 97–114 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

¹¹ Doug Owram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 185–215. Stuart Henderson has noted that long hair and beards were simple ways for youth in Toronto’s Yorkville district in the 1960s to express their

self-expression, anti-materialism, and vivid experience.”¹² During the sixties, most members of society, particularly legal authorities, believed that most, if not all, youth were connected to the counterculture. At the same time, there was not a single, distinct counterculture experience; rather, its appeal was that young people, whether they were hippies or university students (or both), could take from it whatever suited their own needs and desires. It is for this reason that the counterculture has been criticized for being too individualistic in focus and for not adequately questioning the decade’s racism, sexism, and homophobia.¹³ Nevertheless, the passion for challenging accepted norms remained a central part of the 1960s counterculture experience.

Another important factor in studying the sixties involves determining when this decade of rebellion and defiance actually ended. *Life* magazine predicted in December of 1969 that the explosive years of the 1960s would “carry over into the ’70s, and that it [was] impossible to [say] when they [would] end.”¹⁴ While protests remained a fairly dominant feature of late twentieth-century society, there is some consensus among historians that the “long Sixties” ended by 1972 or 1973. It is certainly not the case that the “rebellious” sixties immediately gave way to the “passive” seventies;¹⁵ instead, by 1972–73, as many of the baby boomers grew older and graduated from university, they began to turn away from social activism and concentrated more upon making a living and raising a family.¹⁶ A more nuanced assessment of when the sixties ended asserts that, in the early 1970s, a change occurred in the dynamics of resistance. Large-scale, nationally based social movements were becoming decentralized and more local in focus.¹⁷ But with the decline of the classic social movements of the 1960s – civil rights, black power, and anti-war – came the maturation of newer social movements. These included the women’s and gay liberation

difference. See Stuart Henderson, *Making the Scene: Yorkville and Hip Toronto in the 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 109–13.

¹² As quoted in Pitsula, *New World Dawning*, 200.

¹³ George Lipsitz, “‘Who’ll Stop the Rain?’ Youth Culture, Rock ‘n’ Roll, and Social Crises,” in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber, 226 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

¹⁴ As quoted in Anderson, *Sixties*, 177.

¹⁵ Carl Boggs, “Rethinking the Sixties Legacy: From New Left to New Social Movements,” in *Breaking Chains: Social Movements and Collective Action*, ed. Michael Peter Smith, 59 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991).

¹⁶ Owram, *Born at the Right Time*, 280–307; Pitsula, *New World Dawning*, 14–15; and Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” in *The 60s without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayres, Andus Stephanson, Stanley Aronowitz, and Fredric Jameson, 205–6 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

¹⁷ Andrew Hunt, “‘When Did the Sixties Happen?’ Searching for New Directions,” *Journal of Social History* 33, 1 (1999): 152 and 157.

movements and the environmental movement, each of which transcended its 1960s roots and extended the spirit of the era into the 1970s.¹⁸ This spirit continued to engage many youth in Vancouver and, indeed, lay at the heart of the Gastown smoke-in.

VANCOUVER'S "HIP" COMMUNITIES: KITSILANO AND GASTOWN

Kitsilano, on Vancouver's west side, and specifically five blocks surrounding West 4th Avenue (known as "Love Street"), was the centre of the city's counterculture. Some observers believed that Kitsilano was Vancouver's Haight-Ashbury, the infamous hippie enclave in San Francisco. An article in *Maclean's* in August 1967, entitled "The Dread Hippie Menace," claimed: "All that people around Fourth want is to have a lot of warm loving going on." This sentiment was captured by one resident, who said: "We're pretty tight. Everybody is just trying to work out an okay life."¹⁹ By the summer of 1967, Kitsilano was said to be a "psychedelic slum" full of "large numbers of ... oddly attired and fierce looking characters [and] beatniks." In 1966 and 1967, several residents and business owners in Kitsilano wrote letters to city council imploring it to take action against these "beatniks," who were allegedly lowering property values and driving away customers. The letters singled out a series of shops that apparently spread debauchery and were growing "like a deadly cancer" in the neighbourhood and that threatened the safety of children and young people throughout the city. They included the Psychedelic Shop, which sold records, incense, and "many other trips"; the Phase 4 Coffee House, where one could find "a good time and camaraderie"; and the Horizon Book Store, which possessed "an air of intellectualism." According to the Kitsilano Rate Payers Association and the Kitsilano Chamber of Commerce, all of these stores, along with their owners and clientele, had to be dealt with swiftly in order to eliminate the "Hippie problem," which they considered a "disgrace" to the community. Such stores also posed a health risk because hippies allegedly eschewed cleanliness and brought "many contagious afflictions" into the neighbourhood. Ultimately, the letter writers hoped that something would be

¹⁸ Varon, Foley, and McMillian, "Time Is an Ocean," 5; and Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987), 417-24.

¹⁹ As quoted in Myrna Kostash, *Long Way from Home: The Story of the Sixties Generation in Canada* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1980), 122. For an insightful and detailed discussion of Kitsilano and how Vancouver city council and the police responded to the "hippie problem," see Daniel Ross, "Panic on Love Street: Citizens and Local Government Respond to Vancouver's Hippie Problem, 1967-68," *BC Studies* 180 (Winter 2013/14): 11-41.

done about these hippies “so that one [might] once again walk the streets of Kitsilano in peace and safety.” If nothing were done, Kitsilano would become “a second Toronto Yorkville or San Francisco North Beach.”²⁰ It was within this context of growing public concern about this area that the City of Vancouver decided to commission a Vancouver police report on hippies in Kitsilano.²¹

As Daniel Ross notes, many in Vancouver viewed “the scene” in Kitsilano – and, by extension, hippies – with “apprehension.”²² Vancouver chief of police R.M. Booth’s report on hippies in Kitsilano, which he submitted to the mayor and city council on 8 March 1967, embodied this apprehension. Booth claimed that numerous “Beatnik Establishments” along West 4th Avenue were havens for the sale and distribution of drugs. One in particular, the Afterthought Theatre, was the “foremost meeting place of marijuana and L.S.D. users” in Vancouver and “a place to cultivate new recruits.” These new recruits were supposedly young people (some as young as thirteen) who frequented these stores. In addition to taking the necessary police action against the Afterthought Theatre, Booth recommended that city council revoke the licences of every beatnik establishment in Kitsilano.²³ Booth’s suggestions were in keeping with the police department’s view that the best way to deal with the “hippie problem” was through “strict law enforcement,” which translated into young people who congregated on West 4th Avenue being regularly stopped by police. Police would often ask them for identification and/or to prove that they possessed the means to support themselves. Failure to produce the appropriate documents could result in a vagrancy charge or, in the case of minors, being placed in protective custody.²⁴ This attempt at legal regulation also extended to some hippie businesses that municipal officials targeted for possible violations of the city’s health and/or fire codes.²⁵ These tactics soon resulted in tensions and confrontations between police and youth, the latter of whom felt they were being harassed.

²⁰ R.M. Booth, *Sub-Committee Report on Hippies in Vancouver, 1966-1967*, City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter CVA), 79-B-5, file 11. This belief that hippies were a “disease” that infected society also existed in Toronto. See Stuart Henderson, “Toronto’s Hippie Disease: End Days in the Yorkville Scene, August 1968,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 17, 1 (2006): 205-33; and Henderson, *Making the Scene*, 242-70.

²¹ Booth, *Sub-Committee Report on Hippies in Vancouver*.

²² Ross, “Panic on Love Street,” 11-12.

²³ Booth, *Sub-Committee Report on Hippies in Vancouver*.

²⁴ By August 1967, the Vancouver Police Department had placed two hundred minors in protective custody and laid thirty-eight vagrancy charges (nine such charges had been laid in the previous year). See Ross, “Panic on Love Street,” 25-27.

²⁵ Ross, “Panic on Love Street,” 26-27.

Besides Kitsilano, Vancouver's "hip" people congregated in Gastown. Named for Gassy Jack Deighton, who opened Vancouver's first saloon, Gastown was an "area of free exchange in a milieu of corporate cannibalism."²⁶ Located in the city's downtown core (primarily Water, Alexander, Powell, and Carrall streets), Gastown was home to an eclectic mix of restaurants and bars that catered to middle-class residents and tourists, alongside "freak bars" – the Dominion, the Alcazar, and Jassy Jack's Place (which were "comfortable places in which to drink and rub shoulders with old winos, to deal and to score"²⁷) – and hip stores such as Junior Jelly Beans for Jeans and the Tin Ear. Besides being a symbol of "hip consumerism," Gastown was, in the opinion of the *Vancouver Sun*, "vibrant and interesting," with a European flair.²⁸

Gastown also attracted a number of "dissatisfied" youth from across the country who came to Vancouver craving new experiences. But many of these young Canadians did not necessarily find economic security in Gastown or Vancouver generally; rather, they joined the swollen ranks of British Columbia's unemployed.²⁹ As one newspaper reported in 1971, those eighteen to twenty-five years of age were the hardest hit by the province's economic crisis.³⁰ This was so much so that, early in 1971, a group of 250 people, most of whom were young, converged on City Hall and, in a symbolic protest, fired every member of city council for their inability to deal with high youth unemployment.³¹ This protest underscores the concerns that many youth had about social issues (notably unemployment and poverty) – concerns they felt were being ignored by mainstream society. Some of these youth lived in the cheap hotels and hostels that were scattered throughout the district, and many hung out in the plethora of stores, restaurants, and bars that lined the streets of Gastown in search of food, work, and friends. One observer noted that, by the end of 1970, a growing problem in Gastown was the "increasing population of young deadbeats – the acid freaks and the anarchists who

²⁶ As quoted in Michael Barnholden, *Reading the Riot Act: A Brief History of Riots in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2005), 89.

²⁷ Kostash, *Long Way from Home*, 123.

²⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 9 August 1971. The Tin Ear was a record store.

²⁹ In early 1971, British Columbia's unemployment rate was above 9 percent, which was one of the highest rates in the country. Vancouver's population in 1971 was 426,256, an increase of 41,734 since 1961. See Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 295 and Table 17 (390).

³⁰ *Georgia Straight*, 18–21 May 1971. In 1971, 23 percent of Vancouver's population was between the ages of twenty and thirty-four. See Ross, "Panic on Love Street," 16.

³¹ *Georgia Straight*, 27 January–3 February 1971.

adopted Gastown as their own.”³² This derogatory portrayal of young people and hippies as “deadbeats” was echoed by an undercover RCMP officer: “I have never seen a true ‘Hippie’ doing an honest day’s labour for his pay. Begging on the streets and selling the ‘Georgia Straight’ paper seems a lot easier.”³³

Although the youth of Vancouver were heterogeneous, here, as elsewhere, politicians, police, and the media constructed them as “a distinct [homogeneous] group ... on the basis of the commonality of their situation and attitudes.” This was the conclusion drawn by the Committee on Youth, which was established by the federal government to study the “aspirations, attitudes and needs of youth” in Canada. The committee conducted its study in 1969 and 1970 and released its final report in July 1971. It found that many young people lived in relative poverty and were frustrated by their inability to locate work. As a result, they “displayed an inarticulate sense of alienation, expressed occasionally in rowdyism,” and many “experimented with drugs and collective styles of living and had begun to mobilize a coherent critique of Canadian society.”³⁴ This critique included a demand for a voice in the decision making that affected their lives and improved forms of job training. The Committee on Youth also believed that young persons in British Columbia seemed to be “more impatient than youth elsewhere about getting [their demands] implemented.”³⁵ It noted that some youth had turned to strategies of direct action to enact social change and that, when this change did not occur quickly, they became despondent.

To cope with this alienation, many youth turned to the sense of community that had formed in Gastown by the late 1960s. In 1969 the *Georgia Straight*, Vancouver’s first “underground” newspaper, which was founded in 1967 to “annoy establishment institutions ... and ... provide a local voice for whatever counterculture exist[ed] in Vancouver,”³⁶ alerted its readers to the fact that developers, who wanted to increase the number of office buildings in Vancouver, were turning their attention to Gastown. As the *Georgia Straight* warned, “the do-gooder/investor

³² Gary Bannerman, *Gastown: The 107 Years*, Vancouver City Archives, 1974, 27. For more on the role of anarchism and anarchists in Vancouver’s counterculture, see Eryk Martin, “The Blurred Boundaries of Anarchism and Punk in Vancouver, 1970–1983,” *Labour/Le Travail* 75 (Spring 2015): 9–41.

³³ As quoted in Marcel Martel, “‘They Smell Bad, Have Diseases, and Are Lazy’: RCMP Officers Reporting on Hippies in the Late Sixties,” *Canadian Historical Review* 90, 2 (2009): 234.

³⁴ Canada, *It’s Your Turn: A Report to the Secretary of State by the Committee on Youth* (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1971), 31 and 55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 31 and 55–57.

³⁶ As quoted in Barman, *The West beyond the West*, 315.

complex ... promises to swamp Gastown in its enlightened embrace.” In essence, these developers wanted to rid Gastown of “Indians, drunks, the aged, the poor, the prostitutes, drug addicts, and last and certainly not least the hip community,” the very people who called it home.³⁷ The *Georgia Straight* urged the residents of Gastown to “build a sense of a particular community with a set of values different and worth preserving in the midst of another, larger, homogenizing society.”³⁸ The feeling of alienation experienced by many hippies and young people who either lived in or spent a great deal of their time in Gastown or Kitsilano found expression in the smoke-in and other demonstrations that were staged in Vancouver in response to the discrimination and harassment that they encountered from some businesses and the police.

THE “GROWING POWER OF FASCISM” IN VANCOUVER:
HIPPIES AND YOUTH ENCOUNTER DISCRIMINATION
AND HARASSMENT

“Long hairs” (as hippies were often referred to in the Vancouver media and by the police) and many young people (by virtue of their alleged association with the counterculture) were not always welcome in parts of the city.³⁹ Similarly, elements of the counterculture, which were deemed to be obscene and offensive, were censored. A study commissioned by the Narcotic Addiction Foundation of British Columbia into Vancouver’s “new drug scene” found that hippies were “visible, young, naïve, defiant, noisy and [thought] they [could] change a law by flouting it.” They were also “troublemakers,” who, by gathering in public spaces, were an “‘eye-sore’ to the establishment.”⁴⁰ But the efforts to harass and intimidate Vancouver’s hippies elicited a quick, and often organized, response. This discrimination also deepened their sense of alienation and it may have strengthened their attachment to Gastown, where, for the most part, they felt welcomed and among friends. In 1968, the Hudson’s Bay Store on Georgia and Granville streets instituted a “No ‘Hippies’ allowed” policy at its Round Table Restaurant. Uniformed guards were stationed at the entrance to the restaurant with instructions to prevent

³⁷ *Georgia Straight*, 14–20 May 1969.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ It is alleged that, in 1971, Mayor Tom Campbell wanted to use the War Measures Act to drive hippies, and Vietnam draft dodgers, out of Vancouver. See Dominique Clement, *Canada’s Rights Revolution: Social Movements and Social Change, 1937–82* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 72–73.

⁴⁰ Ingeborg Paulus, *Psychedelic Drug Use in Vancouver: Notes on the New Drug Scene* (Vancouver: The Narcotic Addiction Foundation of British Columbia, 1967), 27.

anyone who looked like a hippie – essentially young people who had long hair and/or a beard – from entering. According to the Bay, hippies were only buying a few items and were occupying tables in the restaurant for too long and thereby denying them to “straight” paying customers and inconveniencing shoppers generally.⁴¹

In response, a group calling itself the Vancouver Liberation Front occupied the Bay in May 1968. They demanded that the Bay treat hippies and young people the same as any other customer and allow them access to the restaurant. The police were called, and they removed the demonstrators and arrested several for trespassing. Not to be outdone, that night a group of protesters surrounded the jail on Main Street and called for the release of those who had been arrested. During the demonstration a few police officers were pelted with eggs and rocks. The riot squad moved in and cleared the scene, but no arrests were made.⁴² The Bay’s “No ‘Hippies’ allowed” policy was still in place by 1970. This time the Yippies staged a “sit-in” at the Bay. The Yippies were particularly outraged because they felt that the Bay reaped profits from the sale of clothing to youth, including hippies, but hypocritically refused to serve them in its restaurant.⁴³

Other incidents of discrimination and censorship directed at hippies and youth continued into 1969, 1970, and 1971. In May 1969, the city’s chief licence inspector informed the artistic director of the Vancouver Playhouse that a scheduled performance of the musical *Hair* should not proceed due to its “immoral and lewd” subject matter. So in order to avoid a possible fine and the suspension of the Playhouse’s licence, the theatre cancelled the show. Then, in July, the inspector closed the play *Camera Obscura* after a few performances because the actors wore only clear plastic costumes.⁴⁴ The *Georgia Straight* was also a target of City Hall’s scheme to censor Vancouver’s counterculture. On several occasions, Mayor Tom Campbell had publicly stated that the *Georgia Straight* was a “rag” that published nothing but “filth.” Between 1967 and 1971, the *Straight*’s office and staff were subjected to countless searches and seizures, fines, and criminal charges. For instance, in 1967 its licence was temporarily suspended because it had apparently sold copies to schoolchildren, and, in 1969, it faced twenty-two criminal charges, including a fine of \$1,500

⁴¹ *Georgia Straight*, 8–21 March 1968. “Straight,” or “Straights,” was used to describe anyone who was not a hippie. See *Vancouver Sun*, 24 September 1971.

⁴² Barnholden, *Reading the Riot Act*, 89.

⁴³ *Vancouver Sun*, 8 May 1970.

⁴⁴ L.A. Powe, “The *Georgia Straight* and Freedom of Expression in Canada,” *Canadian Bar Review* 48, 3 (1970): 414.

for “counselling to commit a criminal offence” after it had published an article on how to grow marijuana. The editor, who was also fined five hundred dollars, was placed on probation for three months.⁴⁵

At times the harassment of hippies and youth resulted in arrests. Young people often congregated on the grounds in front of the Vancouver courthouse on Smithe Street. But the city viewed their presence as a nuisance, and, in 1968, it decided to prosecute them using a provincial order-in-council that prohibited loitering in areas near government buildings. Incensed at this decision, close to two hundred people gathered at the courthouse on 6 March 1968 in a show of defiance. The police arrested a group of people and charged them with loitering. At the trial of one of the demonstrators, Judge Lawrence Eckhardt declared that the order-in-council was discriminatory but that he had no choice but to apply the law.⁴⁶ This battle over access to Vancouver’s public spaces also led at times to violent clashes with the police. In June 1970, the police department’s riot squad broke up an occupation, by a group of hippies, of the Four Seasons waterfront redevelopment site. The land, which was near Stanley Park, had been taken over by hippies, who renamed it “All Seasons Park” and proclaimed it to be a people’s park and a campsite for the homeless. A few months later, the “Battle of Jericho” was fought between the police and a gang of youths who had refused to leave the Jericho Youth Hostel in Kitsilano after they had been evicted.⁴⁷ These incidents were part of a wave of seventy “street demonstrations” that took place in Vancouver from August 1970 to August 1971.⁴⁸ Even though not every hippie or young person was an activist, they often came together over common social causes, such as the need for public housing and a solution to youth unemployment and poverty, and to stand against the “growing power of Fascism” in Vancouver.⁴⁹

In addition to the hippies and youth at these demonstrations, another prominent participant was the Youth International Party. The Yippies were the so-called “angry” hippies who hoped to channel the “pre-political rebelliousness of the counterculture toward an activism” for

⁴⁵ The city also threatened to arrest any vendor who sold the *Georgia Straight*. During this period the *Georgia Straight* had a weekly circulation of between sixty and seventy thousand copies. See Powe, “*Georgia Straight* and Freedom of Expression,” 411 and 415; Kostash, *Long Way from Home*, 267; Clement, *Canada’s Rights Revolution*, 71-72; and Ross, “Panic on Love Street,” 31.

⁴⁶ Powe, “*Georgia Straight* and Freedom of Expression,” 425-26.

⁴⁷ Barnholden, *Reading the Riot Act*, 89-90.

⁴⁸ *Vancouver Police Department, Annual Report, 1971*, CVA, ser. 616, PDS 25.

⁴⁹ *Georgia Straight*, 10-13 August 1971.

social change.⁵⁰ The Yippies described themselves as non-authoritarian, communal, and anti-hierarchical.⁵¹ Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman co-founded the Yippies in the United States on 31 December 1967. The Yippies wanted a better society, and the only people who could make this new society possible, Rubin believed, were the young.⁵² The Yippies were involved in a number of protests and social causes in Vancouver in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example, they tried to alleviate poverty by opening a food co-op. And, in April 1970, they burned in effigy George Shrum, the head of BC Hydro, which operated the city's tram-line buses, to denounce a hike in bus fares.⁵³ The Yippies' actions alerted the RCMP to the possible danger that this "militant" group posed to public safety. During the hearings that were held in the wake of the Gastown riot, Constable Ronald Paul testified that the RCMP had had the Yippies under surveillance for the past two years.⁵⁴ Constable Paul's testimony highlights the belief among the city's law enforcement officials that the Yippies were a serious threat to law and order. The police also believed that another insidious menace to societal stability was drugs, which, they felt, had to be figuratively, and literally, swept off of Vancouver's streets.

VANCOUVER'S "NON-CRIMINAL ADDICTS" AND OPERATION DUSTPAN

Of all the forms of harassment and intimidation that hippies and young people encountered in Vancouver during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Operation Dustpan was the most concerted, and it provoked the greatest outrage and backlash from the city's counterculture community. Operation Dustpan convinced many in this community that the police were determined to harass young people and drive them out of Gastown. Similarly, Indigenous people were subjected to police harassment and searches during this period, which served to further marginalize them within Gastown and the city generally. Moreover, Operation Dustpan underscored that, in the minds of the city's civic leaders, police, and many citizens, drugs had to be eradicated from Vancouver. Perhaps

⁵⁰ Lipsitz, "Who'll Stop the Rain?" 225.

⁵¹ *Georgia Straight*, 24-28 September 1971.

⁵² Jerry Rubin, "A Yippie Manifesto," in *The Radical Vision: Essays for the Seventies*, ed. Leo Hamaliam and Frederick R. Karl, 16 and 24 (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1970). When asked "What's a Yippie?" Abbie Hoffman replied, "A hippie who has been hit over the head by a cop." As quoted in Gerard J. DeGroot, *The Sixties Unplugged: A Kaleidoscopic History of a Disorderly Decade* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 261.

⁵³ *Georgia Straight*, 1-8 April and 2-9 September 1970.

⁵⁴ *Globe and Mail*, 23 September 1971.

unlike any other issue, drug use, especially the use of “soft” drugs like marijuana, revealed the generational divide between many of Vancouver’s youth and legal authorities in the late 1960s and early 1970s – a divide that was common throughout Canada’s cities. It was this division over a multitude of social and political issues, as well as the tactics employed by the police during Operation Dustpan, that helped to pave the way for the Gastown Smoke-In and Street Jamboree and what followed.⁵⁵

In 1969, the Vancouver Police Department delivered a formal report to the Commission of Inquiry into the Non-Medical Use of Drugs in Canada, otherwise known as the Le Dain Commission (in recognition of the commission’s chair, Gerald Le Dain, Dean of Osgoode Hall Law School). In their submission, the Vancouver police outlined the city’s growing problem with soft drugs. Prior to 1960, they claimed, there were few marijuana offences in Vancouver; however, after 1962, as a result of the rise of the “hip” movement, the number of marijuana offences apparently rose at an alarming rate. The police estimated that, in October 1969, there were two thousand “known” drug users in Vancouver and another twenty-five hundred suspected users.⁵⁶ Of particular concern to the police was the young age of these users: on average, most were twenty-four. And within this growing group of users there existed a new kind of addict: the “non-criminal addict.” These addicts, the police argued, do not start out as criminals; rather, their introduction to drug use “stems from the fascination of youth for the sub-culture of the hip movement and the new cult of the ‘free thinkers’ bent on ridding the community of what they consider to be ‘hang-ups’ and false values.” The police maintained that these non-criminal addicts engaged in “productive activities” but that they were not far removed from committing criminal acts in order to feed their insatiable drug habit.⁵⁷

Equally troubling for the Vancouver police was the fact that soft drugs users were “more disposed to become heroin addicts than persons without drug experience.” This claim seemed to be supported by police statistics, which indicated that, from 1968 to 1972, the number of persons charged with trafficking in heroin in Vancouver had risen from 16 to 222 and that, over the same period, those charged with trafficking in soft drugs rose from 31 to 348.⁵⁸ Very few Canadians smoked “weed” prior to 1960,

⁵⁵ *Georgia Straight*, 10–13 August 1971; and Greg Marquis, “Constructing an Urban Drug Ecology in 1970s Canada,” *Urban History Review* 42, 1 (Fall 2013): 27–40.

⁵⁶ *The Non-Medical Use of Drugs: A Report to the Commission of Enquiry into the Non-Medical Use of Drugs*, prepared by the Vancouver City Police Department, October 1969, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 33, vol. 15, file 1702, 5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11; *Vancouver Police Department, Annual Report, 1972*, CVA, ser. 616, PDS 25.

but from 1960 onwards, its popularity increased, and so did the call for its legalization. Those who advocated for legalization, mainly young people but also some politicians and doctors, argued that marijuana was a harmless recreational drug. They also felt that thousands of Canadians should not have to endure the burden of a criminal record for using a small amount of marijuana.⁵⁹ Indeed, in 1972 the Le Dain Commission recommended that possession of marijuana be decriminalized.⁶⁰ However, a majority of Canadians opposed drugs and their legalization. An April 1970 Gallup poll revealed that 77 percent of Canadians did not support the removal of criminal sanctions against marijuana. They believed that drugs were a threat to users' health and would lead to a breakdown in social order. These sentiments allowed the RCMP and municipal police forces, both of whom believed that marijuana was a "gateway" drug to more lethal substances, to continue their crackdown on drugs and the young people who used them, which meant that both continued to be demonized by the police and the media.⁶¹

With the launch of Operation Dustpan in July 1971, the Vancouver police began a more focused effort to clamp down on drug use in the city. The Vancouver Police Department's 1971 Annual Report (which covered the period from August 1970 to August 1971) announced that the "drug ... problem" in the city had "developed to epidemic proportions" and, as such, had "contributed in large measure to our total crime picture."⁶² What had changed was that the "non-criminal addict" of the late 1960s had, seemingly overnight, been transformed into the "criminal addict" who was now involved "in all forms of major crime." Operation Dustpan, it was hoped, would slow the spread of drugs and control drug-related crime in the city. The main focus of Operation Dustpan was Gastown. Within ten days of the start of this operation, the police had arrested

⁵⁹ Catherine Carstairs, *Jailed for Possession: Illegal Drug Use, Regulation, and Power in Canada, 1920-1961* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 11-12; and Marcel Martel, "Law versus Medicine: The Debate over Drug Use in the 1960s," in *Creating Postwar Canada: Community, Diversity, and Dissent, 1945-75*, ed. Magda Fahrni and Robert Rutherford, 315 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008).

⁶⁰ Marquis, "Constructing an Urban Drug Ecology," 38.

⁶¹ Beginning in 1965, the number of arrests under the Narcotic Control Act for possession, cultivation, and trafficking increased dramatically. One hundred and sixty-two people were charged that year, 398 the next year, and 1,678 in 1967-68. It was not until 1969 that the penalties for possession were reduced, which meant that, by 1972, 95 percent of those who were convicted of marijuana possession paid fines instead of going to jail. See Marcel Martel, *Not This Time: Canadians, Public Policy, and the Marijuana Question, 1961-1975* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 195; Martel, "Law versus Medicine," 323 and 329; Greg Marquis, "From Beverage to Drug: Alcohol and Other Drugs in 1960s and 1970s Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 39, 2 (2005): 61; and Marquis, "Constructing an Urban Drug Ecology," 27-28.

⁶² *Vancouver Police Department, Annual Report, 1971*.

109 young men and women on charges of possession and trafficking; 59 of those 109 were arrested in Gastown.⁶³

Besides targeting young people in Gastown, Operation Dustpan contributed to the social construction of Vancouver's "drug problem" as well as to the negative images of hippies. However, the drug panic of the late 1960s and early 1970s was overblown: far more Canadians drank alcohol than smoked marijuana. Yet this did not stop the police and many politicians and parents from believing that the proliferation of drugs constituted a national dilemma. As the federal minister of justice proclaimed in the early 1970s, marijuana symbolized the alienation of youth from Canadian society.⁶⁴ In Vancouver, the police felt that the "hip" movement had jarred parents into realizing that drugs had become a serious social issue. Parents saw their children growing their hair long and dressing in "unorthodox fashions" in an apparent effort to become part of a new "subculture"; the police suggested that this led to parents being "against hippies, against drugs and want[ing] the police to do something about both."⁶⁵

While parents apparently wanted something done about hippies and drugs, young people across the country, especially in Vancouver, were convinced that Canada's drug laws and police practices were both harsh and unfair. The report by the Committee on Youth found that most young Canadians were quite comfortable with drugs as a source of "harmless euphoria" and an escape from a "complex, repressive society." What angered many youths was the fact that, in their eyes, the police did not enforce the law in a uniform fashion. Rather than target all drug users, the police, so the committee was told, concentrated on the "hip sub-culture, the most visible and vulnerable," who thus bore the "brunt of ... legal persecution."⁶⁶ Following the committee's formal interviews and informal discussions with young people from various youth associations and organizations in Vancouver, it recommended that the cultivation, use, and sale of cannabis be legalized because, as it stated: "In retaining the laws against soft drugs, Canadian society is exacerbating rather than

⁶³ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 August 1971. For the year August 1970 to August 1971, there were 1,314 arrests for Narcotic Control Act violations in Vancouver. See *Vancouver Police Department, Annual Report, 1971*.

⁶⁴ The Alcoholism Foundation of British Columbia estimated that, in the early 1970s, the province had forty-four thousand alcoholics. See Marquis, "From Beverage to Drug," 61-63 and 75n42. For more on the social construction of Canada's "drug problem" and the creation of the country's drug laws, see Steve Hewitt, "While Unpleasant It Is a Service to Humanity": The RCMP's War on Drugs in the Interwar Period," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 38, 2 (2004): 80-104; Carstairs, *Jailed for Possession*; and Martel, *Not This Time*.

⁶⁵ *Non-Medical Use of Drugs*, 17-18.

⁶⁶ Canada, *It's Your Turn*, 57 and 71.

curbing a fixed social phenomenon. Drugs, whether one likes it or not, have become one of the popular youth culture's unifying symbols."⁶⁷ The committee noted that, in Vancouver, the incidents of police acting in a hostile fashion towards young people who were staging peaceful demonstrations had been increasing and that such action could "only lead to a vicious circle of escalating violence."⁶⁸

THE GASTOWN SMOKE-IN AND STREET JAMBOREE

Eventually, the Yippies had had enough of Operation Dustpan and what they considered to be the "Gestapo practices" of the police: they used the smoke-in to voice their displeasure. They believed that Operation Dustpan was aimed at young people with long hair and the poor. British Columbia Supreme Court justice Thomas Dohm, who chaired the public inquiry into the riot, lends some credibility to the Yippies' accusation. In his report Dohm wrote that, during Operation Dustpan, the police, without reasonable grounds, searched "all young people who had long hair and unusual wearing apparel."⁶⁹ The smoke-in was also meant to indicate solidarity with the people who had been arrested during Operation Dustpan and to demand: "[an] immediate end to the harassment and intimidation campaign which is being carried out in Gastown by [Mayor] Tom Campbell's police ... an end to arbitrary police questioning and illegal searches ... and an end to the physical brutality currently used by Vancouver police against long hairs in Gastown, Native People ... Hip People ... and poor people generally." Finally, the Yippies used the jamboree to call for the legalization of marijuana so that the law would no longer be used "as a weapon to drive poor hip people out of Gastown ... while more affluent people who may also smoke marijuana [were] made welcome in the area's emporiums of plastic."⁷⁰

The smoke-in was promoted as a "free stage for all kinds of people to climb upon" and express themselves. "People should realize," the *Georgia Straight* declared, "that [the smoke-in] is intended to be a peaceful, sharing, and joyous high-energy event aimed at making the marijuana laws irrelevant." In this sense, the smoke-in was, in both spirit and in practice, a ritualized sharing of public space and a form of theatre. However, as Eryk Martin posits, counter-cultural tactics, such

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 72. The Committee on Youth visited drop-in and employment centres, youth councils, schools, colleges, universities, and coffee houses and bars in Kitsilano and Gastown.

⁶⁸ Canada, *It's Your Turn*, 58.

⁶⁹ *Report on Gastown Inquiry*, 6 October 1971, 7.

⁷⁰ *Georgia Straight*, 6-10 August 1971.

as a smoke-in, a sit-in, or a “be-in,” should be viewed as more than just theatre; rather, these types of protests combined political activism and popular culture in order to appeal to a broad audience, with the ultimate goal being the enactment of social change.⁷¹ The *Straight* also reminded all those who planned to attend the smoke-in that trouble could occur because: “[the] police have a monopoly on how to create violence, so we should be on our guard not to get sucked into their game ... the SMOKE-IN is an act of civil disobedience and commitment; it involves a calculated risk, like everything else we do to be free. The alternative is to do nothing, to remain silent and abandon the dozens of brothers and sisters who are still in jail for dealing in dreams, good and bad.”⁷²

Between fifteen hundred and two thousand people attended the smoke-in in Maple Tree Square. The music of the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and Led Zeppelin filled the air, and many people took part in a street dance, ate ice-cream sandwiches, and chanted “power to the people.” A few in attendance smoked marijuana, and a ten-foot “joint” was paraded through the crowd. Most first-hand accounts of the smoke-in convey the impression that it was a festive, and peaceful, occasion. David Gibson states that the “mood of the crowd was generally friendly,” and Gary Girvan recalls that most attendees wanted to meet friends and take in the atmosphere: “violence was just not in the air.” The same conclusion was drawn by Douglas Grant, who, along with his wife, had come to Gastown after having had dinner in Chinatown and decided to stay for the festivities: “This [the smoke-in] seemed to me to be an appropriate thing to encounter in Gastown as it is an area dedicated to friendship and getting together.”⁷³

At the same time, the Yippies also wanted the smoke-in to be a political protest. Gary Girvan remembers that the only individuals who seemed to be protesting were the Yippies, who read petitions calling for the repeal of the country’s drug laws and burned copies of the Narcotic Control Act. A few boisterous attendees screamed “Fuck [Mayor] Campbell,” “kill the pigs,” and “siege heil.” This, by most accounts, was the extent of the Yippies’ civil disobedience.⁷⁴ The smoke-in was part of a broader “protest *culture*” that the Committee on Youth surmised was a product of the alienating experiences of modern life: “a protest *culture* which shows

⁷¹ Martin, “Blurred Boundaries,” 15, 18, and 25; Lipsitz, “Who’ll Stop the Rain?,” 214.

⁷² *Georgia Straight*, 6–10 August 1971.

⁷³ Affidavits, CVA, 142-A-5, file 4, City Council and Office of the City Clerk, ser. 20.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; Barnholden, *Reading the Riot Act*, 92. While working undercover during the Gastown melee, RCMP constable Ronald Paul saw at least ten members of the Yippies in attendance. See *Globe and Mail*, 23 September 1971.

no signs of abating ... Only the most serious attempts on the part of the older generation to understand the cultural experience of young people will reinstate any measure of harmony between generations.”⁷⁵ However, the actions of the police that evening were anything but an attempt to “reinstate any measure of harmony” between young people and the “older generation.” In the view of Inspector Robert Abercrombie, who was in charge of the police officers on the scene that night, the antics of the Yippies and the other “long hairs” were a threat to law and order, and he believed that he had to act in order to quell this affront to “Decency – the way I like to see it.”⁷⁶

“THERE WERE SOME PIGS LOOSE IN GASTOWN
ON SATURDAY NIGHT”: THE GASTOWN RIOT

When he appeared before the public inquiry into the riot, Inspector Abercrombie indicated that there were several reasons that he had ordered his officers to clear the crowd from Maple Tree Square. These reasons underscore a clear difference of opinion between the police and many of the people who had attended the smoke-in regarding the nature of the events that unfolded that night. Abercrombie felt that many young people posed a danger to his officers because they were carrying bottles and bricks, which could be used as missiles to throw at the police. He had also received reports of windows being broken at local businesses, along with near fights between hippies and “straights.” And the public obscenities, combined with the blaring music, was, in Abercrombie’s mind, inciting the crowd and increasing the possibility that violence would occur. Interestingly, it was later discovered that some of the reports of property destruction and violence were false.⁷⁷

At 10:00 p.m., “acting on his own judgement and on reports given to him by junior officers,” Inspector Abercrombie decided to halt the smoke-in. Using an antiquated “loud-hailer” (megaphone) Abercrombie announced to the crowd that it had two minutes to disperse; however, as witnesses later testified, because of the noise from the festivities, not many people heard Abercrombie’s proclamation. As a result, few people heeded the order to leave the area. So when the throng failed to move, twenty-eight riot police, equipped with helmets and riot sticks, and four officers on horseback, charged towards the crowd. At which point, so one witness remarked, “Pandemonium broke loose.”

⁷⁵ Canada, *It’s Your Turn*, 77 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 24 September 1971.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Shortly after the first charge, it became evident to the police that they needed reinforcements. An additional thirty-six officers were dispatched to the scene, bringing the total police presence to sixty-eight. In the words of one person who had attended the smoke-in, the police “were brutal ... They came in swinging. They didn’t ask people to move.”⁷⁸ Most of the officers swung their riot sticks indiscriminately at the men, women, and children who were attempting to flee. Similarly, the officers on horseback trapped people in the doorways of stores and residences, where they had fled for safety, and then struck these individuals with their riot sticks. The Mounted Squad repeated this practice, on what the police called a “wall to wall basis,” until the streets had been cleared of people.⁷⁹

When the police surged into the crowd they created “utter panic and terror” among many people. One witness claimed that, as a consequence of the actions of the police, the crowd’s mood shifted from light-hearted to fearful and angry. Among some in the crowd, this palpable mood swing produced “open and active hostility” towards the police. They responded by hurling rocks, bottles, pieces of cement, and firecrackers at the police, which no doubt angered the latter and emboldened their efforts to end the protest. This clash, which Justice Dohm characterized as “street combat,” resulted in eleven civilians and six police officers being injured. One journalist wrote that it was a “miracle that no one had been killed.”⁸⁰ The police later admitted that, prior to this outburst, the crowd had been peaceful and that projectiles were only thrown after they had charged into the throng of people who were standing in Maple Tree Square.⁸¹

It may be argued that, of the seventy street demonstrations that occurred in Vancouver over the course of late 1970 and 1971, the Gastown riot produced the worst forms of police brutality against both protesters and innocent bystanders. In the wake of the riot, the mayor’s office and

⁷⁸ *Report on Gastown Inquiry*, 4.

⁷⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 25 September 1971; *Report by Chief Constable J.R. Fisk, to the Vancouver Police Commission, re: Gastown Disturbance, Saturday, 7 August 1971*, 51. A “vetted” copy of this report, received from the Vancouver Police Board, 25 July 2006, is in the author’s possession. In an attempt to prevent more people from going to Gastown and taking part in the riot, radio stations imposed a blackout on reporting about the incident until it had ended. See *Vancouver Sun*, 9 August 1971. The actions of the Mounted Squad are currently referred to as “kettling,” which has been utilized by several police forces in North America, most notably during the G20 protests in Toronto in 2010 and the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York in 2011. Kettling has been condemned by protesters and human rights organizations as an excessive use of police force. See Lesley J. Wood, *Crisis and Control: The Militarization of Protest Policing* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2014), 37-38.

⁸⁰ Bannerman, *Gastown*, 30.

⁸¹ *Report on Gastown Inquiry*, 4; *Vancouver Sun*, 29 September 1971.

a few law firms were inundated with letters and affidavits attesting to this brutality. The consensus of these testimonials was that the police attack was vicious and unprovoked. After seeing the police strike people at random with their riot sticks and throw two people through plate glass windows, David Gibson concluded: "This was one of the most vicious examples of police action I have ever had the misfortune to witness."⁸² Some of these attacks were carried out by undercover police officers, who were part of Operation Dustpan. Fifteen undercover officers were present that night under orders to infiltrate the crowd, identify the leaders of the protest, and, if necessary, arrest them. When the riot began, at least four undercover policemen, who were wearing "regular tourist-type clothing," donned helmets, grabbed riot sticks, and waded into the crowd. The Yippies (and others) alleged that these undercover officers were agent provocateurs who deliberately whipped the crowd into a frenzy in order to create a disturbance and, thereby, justify a swift police response. While the police department officially denied this allegation, an internal police investigation into the riot concluded that the actions of "certain members of this [undercover] Squad were over-aggressive." Thus it was determined that in the future: "under no circumstances will plain-clothes members equipped with riot gear be involved in ... the policing of crowds."⁸³

It seemed to many witnesses that night that the police were simply "swinging first and asking questions later." This sentiment was echoed by a Gastown business owner who told the *Globe and Mail* that the actions of the police exhibited "almost a satanic arrogance." Don Shary, who called the police "storm troopers," reported that he was "hit maliciously with an official police penis extension [i.e., a riot stick]."⁸⁴ Alderman Ed Sweeney, who came to the riot after he was called at home by a *Vancouver Province* reporter, criticized the police tactics. In Sweeney's words, the police used their riot sticks "like you would use a stick to beat a dog."⁸⁵ When the riot had ended, seventy-nine people had been arrested, thirty-eight of whom were charged with offences ranging from causing a disturbance and possession of a dangerous weapon to obstructing a police officer. Most of these charges were later dropped. Ironically, the police had decided, prior to the smoke-in, not to arrest anyone for marijuana

⁸² Approximately one hundred affidavits were sworn out by people who had witnessed the riot. See Affidavits, CVA.

⁸³ Clement, *Canada's Rights Revolution*, 77-78; Affidavits, CVA; and *Report by Chief Constable J.R. Fisk*, 53-54.

⁸⁴ *Globe and Mail*, 9 August 1971; Affidavits, CVA.

⁸⁵ *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, 10 August 1971.

possession. As one of those arrested later recalled: “My youth dropped away completely ... I certainly lost my idealistic notions about the system being ... inherently right ... I guess it quashed my notion that justice would always prevail in the world, because it very clearly hadn’t in this case.”⁸⁶ These comments capture the shock that many people felt over the events of that evening. In the *Vancouver Sun*, Allan Fotheringham succinctly summed up this shock: “Pigs is a dirty word and no one likes to use it, but there were some pigs loose in Gastown on Saturday night.”⁸⁷

“I AM TOTALLY SHOCKED THAT SOMETHING OF THIS SORT
COULD HAPPEN IN CANADA”: THE PUBLIC’S REACTION AND
THE INQUIRY INTO THE GASTOWN RIOT

The public’s reaction to the events of Saturday night, 7 August 1971, was sharply divided between support for and opposition to the police’s actions. Moreover, the views that people expressed about the smoke-in vividly reveal that hippies and young people who used drugs were reviled by some residents of Vancouver and that the Gastown riot further exacerbated the generational divide and conflict that existed in Vancouver. In a letter to Mayor Campbell, for example, Morlaine Hawer stated unequivocally: “My only criticism of the police action is that they were too lenient – they should have used their clubs more on the heads of some of the mindless weirdos!”⁸⁸ Other letter writers argued that criminal charges should not be brought against any of the officers involved in the riot because doing so would make the police reluctant to take decisive action in any future confrontations with hippies, to whom one resident referred as “dirty, drug-ridden tramps.”⁸⁹ This harsh view of hippies also appeared in other letters that the mayor had received. One writer was tired of paying taxes for “youth on Welfare [and] Opportunities for Youth handouts.” In this sense, many who sided with the police felt that the Gastown riot represented an ongoing struggle between decent, hard-working citizens and what Inspector Abercrombie called the “bleeding hearts and marijuana lovers.”⁹⁰

The fervour with which some individuals supported the police in their efforts to disperse the demonstrators in Gastown was matched by those who felt that the police had used extreme force and had thus betrayed

⁸⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 7 August 2001.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 9 August 1971.

⁸⁸ Mayor’s Correspondence, CVA.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

the public's trust. Gary Smith, a twenty-eight-year-old businessman, encapsulated this feeling of betrayal. Smith berated Mayor Campbell for calling those who organized the smoke-in a "bunch of thugs" who would not be allowed to run the city. Such rhetoric, Smith maintained, would only further inflame the situation: "You are acting like a tyrannical, idiotic schoolteacher and it is safe to say [that] your pupils will rebel." He argued that Campbell should instead work with young people, the majority of whom were "well behaved," to deal with the city's social and economic problems.⁹¹ A letter writer to the *Vancouver Sun* had a similar attitude. F. Pratt had not thought much about the riot until she or he had read the newspaper accounts and then felt a mixture of anger at the police and sadness for Vancouver. Although Pratt did not endorse drug use, she/he also did not believe in "Mussolini Hitler type armed thugs masquerading as my police force and I care not against whom they are operating."⁹²

This sense of shock and outrage at the police response to the jamboree was acutely felt by those women and men who experienced the riot first-hand. Chris Munson, an employee at the Gastown Wax Museum, said: "I am totally shocked that something of this sort could happen in Canada. In Canada where the 'Pig' never existed. Now I don't know what to think." Someone else who had difficulty grappling with the events of that night was Sandra Black, who was arrested but not informed of the nature of the charge. This prompted her to question the authority of the police and the law itself: "How long," she asked, "must true justice go ignored in the name of law and order?"⁹³ The disappointment and anger expressed by Munson and Black suggest that, despite the number of clashes involving hippies, Yippies, and the police, many residents of Vancouver were oblivious to the tensions that existed between these groups and to the police brutality that at times resulted from these tensions.

In addition to the public reaction to the riot, the Vancouver Police Department offered its own interpretation of what had transpired in Gastown. Chief of police Fisk appointed an internal investigative team to draw conclusions about how the department had planned for this event and the nature of the police response to what he dubbed the "Gastown Disturbance." The report, which Fisk submitted to the Vancouver Police Commission, claimed that the ability of the police to contain the situation was complicated by the number of "straight" citizens who had visited Gastown that night. Because of this, the police were unable to accurately

⁹¹ Ibid.; *Globe and Mail*, 11 August 1971.

⁹² *Vancouver Sun*, 20 August 1971.

⁹³ Affidavits, CVA.

determine who was, and who was not, taking part in the demonstration. Moreover, the department had not put a great deal of planning into how it would police the smoke-in because it had not been “anticipated that the Smoke-In ... would develop into a major incident.” Nevertheless, Fisk supported Inspector Abercrombie’s decision to clear the crowd because, if he had not done so, “there [was] a strong possibility that the situation could have become riotous.” And to deflect criticism from himself and his officers, Fisk concluded that the smoke-in was a well-planned protest against Operation Dustpan, “with the objective being a confrontation with the Police.” This being the case, he contended that the police had fallen into an expertly laid trap, with a crowd that had been agitated by “professionals to the point where the situation became highly explosive” and a clash was unavoidable.⁹⁴ However, Fisk’s report, and his defence of the department’s actions, did not bring the Gastown saga to a close. The Board of Police Commissioners decided to send Fisk’s report to British Columbia’s attorney general, Leslie Peterson, and ask him to determine if an independent inquiry into the Gastown affair was warranted. While the board expressed its full support for the department, the allegations of police brutality during the smoke-in and the “widespread public concern” surrounding this incident forced it to turn to the provincial government for direction.⁹⁵ The government responded by appointing a public inquiry into the events in Gastown.

The inquiry began public hearings on 13 September, a little more than a month after the riot had occurred. It heard from forty-eight witnesses over the course of ten days and was mandated to investigate the “nature of the said disturbance, the motivation of the persons involved, whether the purpose of the disturbance was in the public interest, the conduct of the members of the public present and whether any such conduct was in defiance of law and order.” The chair of the inquiry, Justice Thomas Dohm of the BC Supreme Court, was also asked to determine the “nature of police intervention and whether or not such intervention was appropriate in the circumstances.”⁹⁶ The inquiry found that the police

⁹⁴ *Report by Chief Constable J.R. Fisk*, 42-47.

⁹⁵ Mayor’s Correspondence, CVA, 45-E-4, file 25, ser. 483, Mayor’s Office Fonds.

⁹⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 7 September 1971. Thomas Dohm was appointed to the British Columbia Supreme Court in 1966 and served until 1972. See Constance Backhouse, *Carnal Crimes: Sexual Assault Law in Canada, 1900-1975* (Toronto: Irwin Law, 2008), 416n56. Dohm may have been appointed to chair this inquiry because he was familiar with the counterculture community in Vancouver and with some of the groups who had planned the smoke-in. In 1967, Dohm denied an application by the *Georgia Straight* for an injunction to prevent the City of Vancouver from suspending its licence after Mayor Campbell had accused the *Straight* of “gross misconduct” when it allegedly sold copies of the paper to schoolchildren. In his ruling, Dohm wrote: “I am of the opinion that his worship Mayor Campbell and chief license inspector Mr. Harrell

had used “unnecessary, unwarranted, and excessive force” against the people who had assembled that night in Gastown. In essence, Dohm concluded that this peaceful gathering became a “riot” as soon as the police had intervened. In Dohm’s mind, the crowd that had assembled for the smoke-in “was not a mob,” nor was it an “unpleasant crowd.” But the arrival of the riot squad, Dohm argued, “caused panic, terror and resentment. The violence erupted only when the police intervened.” Dohm believed that the police had inappropriately used officers mounted on horseback as a first resort to control the crowd when it should have been a last resort. Mounted officers, Dohm claimed, should not have ventured onto sidewalks or the entrances of buildings, which they had done in pursuit of demonstrators, because their presence endangered public safety. And it was obvious to Justice Dohm that some of the police officers were not well trained, particularly those who had physically harmed some of the protesters. These officers, Dohm wrote, are “not suitable for this type of duty.” Nevertheless, the inquiry exonerated most of the police who were involved in the melee: they had “acted in an exemplary manner” and, as such, they “deserve[d] and need[ed] the respect of the citizens they serve[d].”⁹⁷

Despite the fact that Justice Dohm placed a great deal of the responsibility for the Gastown riot on the police, the Yippies did not escape his report unscathed. Dohm denounced the organizers of the smoke-in as a “hard-core group” and as “agitators” who were determined to initiate a confrontation with the police. Two key agitators whom Dohm singled out for criticism were Eric Sommers, a social worker and writer for the *Georgia Straight*, and Kenneth Lester, a freelance writer. Dohm described these members of the Yippies as “intelligent and dangerous, radical young men” who had organized the smoke-in out of their “desire to challenge authority in every possible way.” Their motives were “bad,” and their protests against drug laws and Operation Dustpan were, in Dohm’s opinion, “not sincere.” According to Dohm, the “harassment of young people by the drug squad ... and the resultant hostility was grist to their trouble-brewing mill.” All that the Yippies wanted to do in Gastown that night, Dohm surmised, was to whip the crowd of “gullible young

should be highly commended for their prompt actions ... leading to the suspension of the licence of this ‘newspaper’ and thus preventing the distribution of this filth ... to Vancouver schoolchildren.” As quoted in *The Democratic Commitment*, no.1 (December 1967), 1.

⁹⁷ *Report on Gastown Inquiry*, 4-12 and 15-16. To avoid injuries at future demonstrations, Dohm suggested that mounted officers should not venture onto sidewalks or into the entrances of buildings. He also recommended that plainclothes police not be used for crowd control and that uniformed police officers, including members of the riot squad, should wear numbers on their helmets so that they would be more easily identifiable.

people who were there out of curiosity” into a frenzy. And when the police “over-reacted,” they gave Sommers and Lester the confrontation that they had sought.⁹⁸

In a response printed in the *Georgia Straight* following the release of Dohm’s report, Lester boldly asserted: “If a person becomes dangerous in the eyes of the Establishment for standing up for their beliefs in the face of injustice, then indeed we are dangerous young men. A danger to a dying society.”⁹⁹ Lester also maintained that the smoke-in was an act of peaceful civil disobedience and that the only thing about the gathering that was unlawful was the police response. But Dohm considered the reasons for the smoke-in to be a “sham”: to him, the smoke-in was not an example of civil disobedience but, rather, an act of “criminal disobedience.” Even though Dohm recognized that civil disobedience had become a “fashionable” way for Vancouver’s youth to voice their opposition to unjust laws and social injustices, he believed that it should only be used to reform a law that is “intrinsically reprehensible,” and then only after all constitutional attempts to change that law had been exhausted. Otherwise, in Dohm’s words, civil disobedience was tantamount to “anarchy.”¹⁰⁰ Dohm’s views about civil disobedience were the product of, and perhaps reflected, a growing concern among criminal justice officials in Vancouver over the prevalence of protests and clashes between the police and hippies. And his comment about civil disobedience being a form of anarchy is yet another indication of the generational divide that existed in the city at that time.

The *Georgia Straight* denounced the Dohm inquiry as a “whitewash” because it exonerated the police and dismissed efforts to change public opinion about Canada’s archaic drug laws.¹⁰¹ Other critics of the Vancouver police, notably the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA), were not as harsh in their criticism of Dohm’s report. However, the BCCLA felt strongly that the inquiry could have done more to set in motion a process whereby relations between the police, politicians, and the community could be improved. As the president of the BCCLA, Dr. R.A.H. Robson, argued, Mayor Campbell’s inflammatory remarks about young “thugs” breaking the law throughout the city sowed the seeds for police brutality: “When officials make sweeping condemnations about classes of people, such as transient youth or Gastown citizens, those who are charged with enforcing the law get the

⁹⁸ *Report on Gastown Inquiry*, 7-8.

⁹⁹ *Georgia Straight*, 8-12 October 1971.

¹⁰⁰ *Report on Gastown Inquiry*, 13.

¹⁰¹ *Georgia Straight*, 8-12 October 1971.

message that their duty is to be rough on these citizens.”¹⁰² In December 1971, the BCCLA released its own report on the Gastown riot. *The Police and the Community* argued that the police came to Gastown that night with “very negative, and perhaps for some even spiteful, attitudes” about hippies and young people, which inevitably led to confrontation. It was not surprising, the BCCLA report concluded, that the police viewed social and political protest groups, and the young people who belonged to them, as “strangers” and “weirdos” who posed a risk to social order.¹⁰³

While calling for better communication between the police and the citizens that they served, the BCCLA lamented the fact that the Dohm inquiry had ultimately failed to understand the societal forces that gave rise to the smoke-in. It urged the police and politicians to look beyond the riot and to recognize that the attitudes and beliefs of the youth who organized the smoke-in were grounded in social and economic problems that society needed to address. Similarly, the fact that some young people in Vancouver had proposed apparently “radical” solutions to these problems and had taken direct action to overcome them was not to be dismissed. A healthy society, the BCCLA posited, is one that accepts divergent views with respect, not with scorn or the brute force of the law, which was so evident in the Gastown riot.¹⁰⁴

Given the rather feeble attempt by the Vancouver police and politicians to address the concerns articulated by the Yippies and the BCCLA, it seems that acceptance of the status quo was seen as preferable to fundamental social change. The police department assigned four constables to Gastown, not to establish better relations with the community but to bring about, in the words of Chief Fisk, “a more positive approach ... [to] ... controlling the increasing drug distribution problem.”¹⁰⁵ Moreover, no criminal charges were brought against the police officers involved in suppressing the riot. Attorney General Peterson cited a lack of evidence and the poor calibre of the witnesses as his reasons for not pursuing criminal charges against the officers.¹⁰⁶ The charges against the civilians who were arrested during the riot yielded mixed results: some were fined for creating a disturbance, while others were found guilty of performing an indecent act and obstructing a police officer. In

¹⁰² *Globe and Mail*, 14 August 1971.

¹⁰³ The British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, *The Police and the Community: Implications of the Report of the Commission of Enquiry by Mr. Justice Dohm*, LAC, Vancouver, 1971, 4-5.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-3.

¹⁰⁵ *Vancouver Police Department, Annual Report, 1972*.

¹⁰⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 23 December 1971. The Police Commission demoted one officer, Constable John Whitelaw, who was found to have committed four breaches of the department’s disciplinary code as a result of his actions during the riot. See *Province*, 22 August 1972.

a majority of the cases, however, the charges were dismissed or stayed, mainly due to insufficient evidence or because the arresting officers had not properly identified themselves.¹⁰⁷

In some respects, the Dohm inquiry was a “whitewash” because it failed to deal with the underlying causes of the smoke-in and the riot – namely, the poor social and economic conditions faced by many young people in Gastown (and elsewhere in Vancouver) along with the police harassment of “long hairs.” Nor did Dohm entertain the possibility that Canada’s drug laws, and their enforcement by the police (notably through Operation Dustpan), might in fact be unjust. In this sense, the inquiry contributed little to the public debate over the legalization of marijuana and the treatment of society’s disgruntled youth, especially hippies. So the hippies’ voice was not so much silenced by police actions as it was discredited by the public inquiry and eventually ignored by the mainstream media. The Gastown riot suggests that the sixties in Canada certainly did not end on 31 December 1969, and it counters the view that, in comparison to the tumultuous 1960s, the early 1970s were somehow anti-climactic.¹⁰⁸ As Bryan D. Palmer concludes, the 1960s was a “controversial, contentious, and change-ridden” period in Canada.¹⁰⁹ And the Gastown riot is a key part of this contentious era for it highlights the fact that some young people, including hippies and Yippies, had the courage to challenge what they considered to be social injustices. Similarly, the Gastown jamboree, and the other protests that young people staged against the “growing power of Fascism” in Vancouver between 1968 and 1971, represents the continuation of a key theme of the 1960s – namely, the attempt to bring about social change, particularly with regard to Canada’s laws governing marijuana.

¹⁰⁷ *Province*, October-December 1971.

¹⁰⁸ Hall, “Protest Movements in the 1970s,” 655.

¹⁰⁹ Palmer, *Canada's 1960s*, 24.