

The Thin Blue Line

Briefing Report

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VANCOUVER POLICE DEPARTMENT
Beyond the Call

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Current Landscape

The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May of 2020, set against the backdrop of growing political and social disruption in the United States, resulted in numerous protests involving social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and various other movements. These events prompted important conversations regarding racial justice, police accountability and the relationship between police and community. Those on both sides of the debate share and promote their views, through protests and social media. Calls to defund or abolish the police were met with demonstrations of support for police and “law and order” by groups whose beliefs and guiding principles do not always align with those of police. Various symbols have emerged, were adopted and/or displayed by various movements and groups such that they now have meaning for communities within that context.

In Canada, government policies and police have come under scrutiny for their role in colonization and historical treatment of Indigenous people. While the history and circumstances differ, the conversations around racial justice, police accountability and the relationship between police and community have the same significance as those taking place in the U.S.

History of the Thin Blue Line

The term “Thin Blue Line” is an adaptation of the term “Thin Red Line” which originated when red-coated members of a Scottish regiment of the British Army stood their ground, despite being outnumbered by their Russian foes, in a battle during the Crimean War in 1854. While it is not known when the term was first applied to police, Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) Chief William H. Parker popularized it in the 1950s.¹

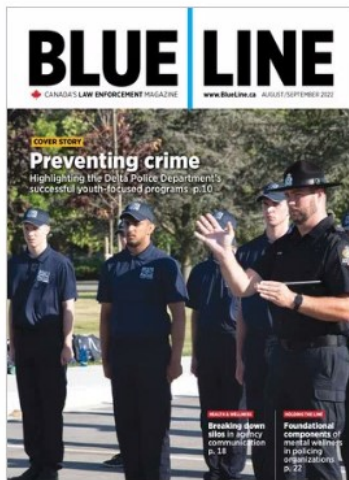


Thin Blue Line symbol

The term and associated symbols evolved organically over many decades, and have become instilled with rich meaning for generations of police officers in North America. The term has

¹ Wikipedia contributors, "Thin blue line," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thin_blue_line (accessed June 7, 2022)

become so mainstream in Canadian policing that *Blue Line* is the name of a respected national policing magazine.



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Blue Line is Canada's national law enforcement magazine. From its inception in 1989 with a circulation of 1,500, Blue Line has now grown to a per issue circulation of more than 8,000. Total readership of each issue, including pass along, is around 64,500.

Blue Line, Canada's only independent law enforcement magazine, has no leaning toward management nor unions and no political preferences. This unbiased approach is why Blue Line is read by the full spectrum of the law enforcement community, from executive management to frontline personnel. Our readers include police chiefs, customs officers, military, local, municipal, provincial and Indigenous police, federal and provincial corrections officers, RCMP and many more. Our in-house staff and guest writers work hard to keep readers on the leading edge of information, whether it be case law, training issues or technology trends.

Police officers have embraced the Thin Blue Line as a universal symbol by which they identify themselves and their mission of protecting and serving the community. In addition to celebrating their mission of public service, the term and symbol have taken on an even deeper meaning, and become a sacred symbol for the families of officers who have died in the line of duty. This is exemplified by the creation of the Police and Peace Officers' Memorial Ribbon (the "Memorial Ribbon") in Canada. Vancouver Police Constable Shawn Coady created the Memorial Ribbon in 1994 to honour the line of duty death of Toronto Police Service Constable Todd Baylis. The black portion expresses mourning, the blue represents the Thin Blue Line and the generic badge represents all police and peace officers.



The Police and Peace Officers' Memorial Ribbon has gone through very little change since it was created in 1994. It is the blue over black ribbon looped at the top similar to other commemorative ribbons. The blue represents the 'thin blue line', that defended by police and peace officers to keep separate anarchy from society. The black represents mourning, that of a loss, as in this case the loss of all police and peace officers who die serving their community. It is pinned with a generic badge emblazoned with a maple leaf. The badge representing all of law enforcement.

The Society is changing the badge slightly by making it a bit larger and emblazing the national Memorial Symbol of the Canadian Police and Peace Officers' Memorial on Parliament Hill. By including the Memorial Pavilion we are becoming the 'official' national symbol of mourning for when an officer is killed in the 'line of duty'. The badge has only gone through three changes, including this latest one, in an effort to become the 'official' National Symbol. The ribbons remain the same. The Ribbon is generic enough to permit all uniformed and plainclothes police and peace officers to wear it. The Ribbon is simple yet smart and respectful.

The British Columbia Police Association, the British Columbia Association of Municipal Chiefs of Police, the Canadian Police Association, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police and the RCMP have all endorsed the Memorial Ribbon. The Police & Peace Officers' Memorial Ribbon Society sets the criteria and protocol for wearing the Memorial Ribbon.²

In turn, the image of the Memorial Ribbon and Thin Blue Line have been incorporated into the Police Memorial shoulder flashes of several B.C. police agencies including the Abbotsford Police Department, Metro Vancouver Transit Police and the New Westminster Police Department.



Unlike the Memorial Ribbon, the Thin Blue Line term and symbol are fully within the public domain, no police force or authority controls use of the term or symbol such that anyone can use them for any cause, potentially degrading their meaning or changing the meaning in the eyes of people outside the policing community.

² Police & Peace Officers' Memorial Ribbon Society, <https://www.memorialribbon.org/> (accessed April 21, 2022)

Thin Blue Line Flag

The Thin Blue Line flag has a more recent history, entangled with rising tension in the U.S. between police and marginalized communities. The death of a black teen in Ferguson, Missouri in August of 2014 was an inflection point in the debate about race and policing in the U.S. and brought BLM to prominence nationally. A countermovement, Blue Lives Matter, emerged later that year in response to the murder of NYPD officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu. The U.S. version of the Thin Blue Line flag was created at that time by U.S. college student Andrew Jacob to show support for the police.



Original U.S. Thin Blue Line flag

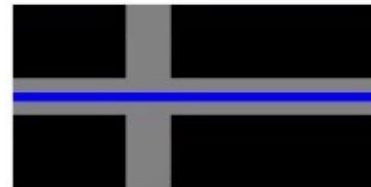
Since that time, police in other nations have adopted their own version of the Thin Blue Line flag.



Canada



Australia



Sweden



Israel



Ukraine



Malaysia

Canadian police officers have proudly embraced the Thin Blue Line flag as a patriotic symbol of their mission in serving and protecting the community, as a symbol of solidarity and *esprit de corps* in the policing community, and to honour fallen officers. The memorial pin created

³ Wikipedia contributors, "Thin blue line," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thin_blue_line (accessed September 13, 2022)

by the Abbotsford Police Department in 2017 to honour the tragic line of duty death of Constable John Davidson and previous line of duty death of Constable John Goyer is a pertinent example. The pin superimposes the fallen officers' badge numbers on a Thin Blue Line flag background:



Abbotsford Police Department Memorial Pin

In a series of Tweets in November of 2020, VPD Inspector Sandra Glendinning explained to her followers what the Thin Blue Line and Thin Blue Line flag mean to her:



 **Sandra Glendinning**  @BehindBlueLine · Nov 2, 2020 ...
Replying to @BehindBlueLine

The blue line represents the men and women of law enforcement who stand between the citizenry and those who would do them harm.

It represents courage.

It represents the sacrifice of those who have fallen in the line of duty.

2 18 194

 **Sandra Glendinning**  @BehindBlueLine · Nov 2, 2020 ...

It's also a show of support for and a way to thank first responders.

Firefighters have a similar patch, but the line is red instead of blue.

For paramedics, the line is white.

For dispatchers, it's yellow.

4 11 176

 **Sandra Glendinning**  @BehindBlueLine · Nov 2, 2020 ...

And the fact that intolerant, racist, and small minded individuals have tried to hijack the image really ticks me off.

They have no understanding of what it actually means to serve on the frontline of policing and being able to do the job without hate, or fear, or prejudice.

3 12 214

 **Sandra Glendinning**  @BehindBlueLine · Nov 2, 2020 ...

So my job, here on Twitter, is to show you that I'm human.

That I'm a daughter, a wife and a mother. A friend, a colleague and an ally.

That I'm not that much different than you.

5 13 383

 **Sandra Glendinning**  @BehindBlueLine · Nov 2, 2020 ...

I'm also a police officer and it has been my honour to live a life of service.

And so, I endeavour to continue to pull the curtain back and show you what it's like behind the blue line.

29 16 533



Red Line patch - Firefighters⁴



Green Line patch – Canadian Armed Forces⁵



White Line patch - Paramedics⁶



Gold Line patch – Emergency Dispatchers⁷



Silver Line patch - Corrections⁸



Orange Line patch – Search & Rescue⁹

⁴ <https://firehouseclothing.ca/products/fha004-two-tone-thin-red-line-canadian-flag-patch> (accessed September 6, 2022)

⁵ <https://www.amazon.ca/X-Sem-Canada-Environment-Services-Rangers/dp/B07J2ZR99Z> (accessed January 3, 2023)

⁶ <https://thethinbluelinecanada.ca/products/thin-silver-line-canadian-flag-patch-8-cm-x-4-cm> (accessed September 6, 2022)

⁷ <https://www.amazon.ca/Canada-Patch-Emergency-Dispatchers-Backing/dp/B06XXZ2GMD> (accessed September 6, 2022)

⁸ <https://thethinbluelinecanada.ca/collections/thin-silver-line-corrections-collection/products/thin-silver-line-canadian-flag-patch-8-cm-x-4-cm> (accessed January 3, 2023)

⁹ <https://www.marway-militaria.com/products/thin-orange-line-canada-flag-search-rescue-morale-patch> (accessed January 3, 2023)

Again, as a symbol in the public domain, various groups have adopted or displayed the Thin Blue Line flag (predominantly the U.S. version) in support of their agenda regardless of whether it aligns with the values and beliefs of the policing community at large. Despite most of this activity occurring in the U.S., social media and the broader media has influenced public sentiment in Canada. Differences between law enforcement in Canada and the U.S. and the distinct, principled meaning for Canadian police officers is lost in the process. Consequently, the Thin Blue Line as a concept, as a symbol, and particularly as a flag, has come to mean different things to different communities. As one American columnist commented:

At the center of the conflict is a symbol that has come to mean vastly different things to different people, a black, white and blue Rorschach test whose significance continues to shift amid a continuing reckoning over racism and police violence.¹⁰

The Canadian Landscape

In response to a small number of public complaints of police officers wearing the Thin Blue Line flag many police agencies in Canada refer to existing uniform standards, which set out the items that may be worn on duty.

In October of 2020, the RCMP issued a directive to its members stating that the Thin Blue Line flag was not approved for members to wear as part of their uniform. RCMP members were encouraged to wear the Memorial Ribbon instead. The union representing RCMP members, the National Police Federation, disagreed with the directive saying it would continue to advocate for members to wear the Thin Blue Line flag.

Other agencies that have cited their existing uniform standards (which prohibit members from wearing unauthorized items including symbols such as the Thin Blue Line flag); include Saint John Police Force¹¹, Toronto Police Service¹² and Edmonton Police Service¹³. The Ottawa Police Service¹⁴ went a step further, when then-Chief Peter Sloly issued a new policy

¹⁰ The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/21/nyregion/police-flag-pelham-school-district.html> (accessed July 12, 2022)

¹¹ CBC News, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/saint-john-police-thin-blue-line-patch-1.6116085> (accessed June 7, 2022)

¹² Toronto Star, <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2021/05/20/toronto-police-remind-officers-to-stick-to-uniform-after-thin-blue-line-patches-spotted-at-homeless-clearance.html> (accessed June 7, 2022)

¹³ Progress Report, <https://www.theprogressreport.ca/the-thin-blue-line-symbol-is-not-allowed-to-be-worn-by-on-duty-edmonton-police> (accessed June 7, 2022)

¹⁴ Global News, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7656019/ottawa-police-chief-bans-thin-blue-line-patch/> (accessed June 7, 2022)

in February of 2021 stating that items not officially approved or authorized by the service had to be removed from members' uniforms. In January 2022, the Saskatoon Board of Police Commissioners requested a report from the Saskatoon Police Service (SPS) regarding Thin Blue Line patches. By report dated May 9, 2022, the SPS concluded that its officers were not permitted to wear it on their uniform¹⁵. As of March 2022, the Montreal Police¹⁶ is conducting a review of their uniform policy after a member of the Quebec National Assembly called for the provincial government to ban it.

The only Canadian police agency known to have specifically approved wearing of the Thin Blue Line flag patch is the Metro Vancouver Transit Police (Transit Police). In response to a service and policy complaint regarding a member wearing a Thin Blue Line flag patch, it reported that the wearing of the patch is approved under Transit Policy AC150. Specifically the report states:

Policy AC150 expressly authorizes Members to wear the "thin blue line" flag patch as provided by section 55, which states:

55. The wearing of any item, save the Remembrance Day poppy and National emblem (in either full colour or **grey\black with a blue line**), not issued to a Member will be with the permission of the Chief Officer.¹⁷ (emphasis added)

Notably, the Transit Police policy refers to the Thin Blue Line flag as a variant of the "National emblem".

While police uniform standards in British Columbia are governed by [Police \(Uniforms\) Regulation](#) pursuant to the *Police Act*, the regulation provides only the basic requirements and is silent with respect to which items may be worn beyond rank insignia, municipal crest badges and shoulder flashes, "special badges awarded for special reasons" and service badges in the form of five pointed stars.

Like many other police agencies, the VPD has uniform standards, which prohibit the use of unauthorized patches or pins. Section 5.4.4, Dress and Department, of the VPD Regulations and Procedures Manual sets out the order of dress "...to ensure a consistent and uniform appearance throughout the Vancouver Police Department." Sub-section 28 set outs the

¹⁵ CBC News, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/thin-blue-line-patch-saskatoon-not-allowed-1.6459887> (accessed June 16, 2022)

¹⁶ CTV News, <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/montreal-police-under-scrutiny-after-some-officers-wear-thin-blue-line-patches-1.5400203> (accessed June 7, 2022)

¹⁷ Police Board Report No. 2022-27 "Thin Blue Line" Symbol: Historical Context and Existing Policy, <https://transitpolice.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Board-Report-No.-2022-27-Service-or-Policy-Complaint.pdf> (accessed July 12, 2022)

“Undress Ribbons and Authorized Bar(s)” that may be worn on a Standard Operational Duty Uniform and it does not include any bars incorporating the Thin Blue Line. Section 5.4.11, Funeral Protocol, in sub-sections 10 and 11, sets out the occasions when the Memorial Ribbon may be worn (police funeral and the week ending in Police & Peace Officers’ Memorial Day). The most recent addition to approved items is the VPD Pride Pin18. Section 5.5.4, Body Armour, states in sub-section 4 that that “Members shall affix a VPD-issued “Vancouver Police” identifier tag and identification tag (with PIN or surname and first initial) to the external body armour carrier (EBAC); no other patches, tags or placards may be affixed to the EBAC without approval of the Uniform Committee.” To date, no bar or patch depicting the Thin Blue Line or Thin Blue Line flag has been approved for VPD members to wear as part of their uniform.

Recent Controversies Regarding the Thin Blue Line Flag

Nowhere in Canada has the controversy regarding this issue been more pronounced than in Calgary, Alberta.

On March 30, 2022, after a year of deliberation, the Calgary Police Commission directed that Calgary Police Service (CPS) officers stop wearing “Thin Blue Line patches” in reference to Thin Blue Line flag patches CPS officers had been wearing as Velcro attachments to exterior body armour.¹⁹



Thin Blue Line image published by the Calgary Police Commission

In the press release regarding its decision, the Commission stated:

Police officers and their families largely wear the thin blue line to honour the fallen, express support for those who serve and recognize the special role that police have in society. However, the thin blue line also has a contentious history with roots in division, colonialism and racism, most recently being prominently displayed at counter protests against the Black Lives Matter movement.

¹⁸ Section 5.4.4 – sub-sections 35, 36 and 37.

¹⁹ Calgary Police Commission, <https://www.calgarypolicecommission.ca/police-directed-to-replace-the-thin-blue-line-patch/> (accessed April 21, 2022)

It cited a number of factors behind its decision including:

- The military origin of the term celebrates a colonial military that forcibly took land from Indigenous Peoples from all over the world;
- The dividing line metaphor is contrary to one of the Peelian principles of policing that “the police are the public and the public are the police”;
- The Thin Blue Line flag has been featured prominently in high-profile protests espousing white nationalist or racist views including counter protests against the Black Lives Matter movement.

The Commission did not draw a distinction between the Thin Blue Line concept/symbol and the Thin Blue Line flag/patch. The Calgary Police Association and Senior Officer’s Association not only disagreed with the Commission’s decision but also purchased enough Thin Blue Line flag patches and pins for all of their members to wear in defiance of the Commission’s directive. As a consequence, more CPS members wore the Thin Blue Line flag patch than previously had. In response, one member of the Commission, Gian-Carlo Carra (one of two city counsellors on the 12 member Commission), went further in his comments regarding the Thin Blue Line flag patch:

"What we are asking here is that our police service not wear a known hate symbol whose origins are buried in hateful thoughts and hateful deeds, when they serve the public," said Carra.

"If we have members of the service who think that whatever sense of entitlement they have trumps that, there will be a reckoning."²⁰

Recognizing the gulf between its directive and the deeply held, principled views of CPS members the Commission opted not to proceed with enforcement but instead to continue dialogue with the CPS and its Associations:

The Calgary Police Commission is supportive of not moving forward with enforcement of its direction that thin blue line patches be replaced or removed from on-duty officers, to allow further conversations with Calgary’s two police associations.

While the Commission’s decision has not changed, it is understood that the road to compliance will take time. The Commission wants, as much as possible, to try get buy-in and voluntary compliance before looking at enforcement.

²⁰ CTV News, <https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/deadline-arrives-for-calgary-police-service-members-to-remove-thin-blue-line-patch-1.5925596> (accessed August 23, 2022)

“As a group, our Commission has recognized from the outset that officers wear the thin blue line patch to honour the fallen, support each other and recognize the special role police have in society,” said Commission Chair Shawn Cornett. “While a personal view previously expressed by one Commissioner unfortunately sent a different message, the Commission as a whole has never doubted that officers wear the symbol to express positive things.”²¹

In late May of 2022, the Calgary Police Association emailed its members and “reluctantly” recommended that its members remove Thin Blue Line flag patches from their duty uniforms while discussions with the Commission continue.²²

Co-opting the Canadian Flag

Resurgent social justice movements and opposition to health mandates arising from the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many symbols being displayed by various groups in support of their cause during numerous protests.

The Canadian flag was prominently displayed by protesters participating in the “Freedom Convoy” in early 2022 leading to unease amongst Canadians about the symbolism of the national flag. This prompted a columnist to ask, “Is that flag a symbol of protest or of unity?” and report this sentiment:

“I shouldn’t have to feel awkward, and that’s what bothers me most,” said Brian Lewis, who is running for a City Council seat in Hamilton, Ontario, a city west of Toronto. “I’m proud of my country and what it stands for,” he added. But, Mr. Lewis said, in February, he started “to get looks” for flying a Canadian flag on his car.²³

Another reporter captured similar sentiments:

Victor Crapnell remembers the uneasy feeling he had watching the Freedom Convoy protests unfold in his hometown of Ottawa in February. The feeling came as he saw the red and white maple leaf on Canada's flag standing out against the snowy backdrop.

²¹ Calgary Police Commission, <https://www.calgarypolicecommission.ca/dialogue-on-thin-blue-line-patch-as-a-positive-step/> (accessed August 23, 2022)

²² CTV News, <https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/deadline-arrives-for-calgary-police-service-members-to-remove-thin-blue-line-patch-1.5925596> (accessed August 23, 2022)

²³ The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/01/world/canada/canada-day-flag-freedom-convoy.html> (accessed September 7, 2022)

The Victoria resident says seeing the image of the flag displayed so prominently, on some occasions alongside Confederate and Nazi flags, stirred up emotions he says he never usually associated with the country's most recognizable symbol.

"It sort of hit home to me that our beautiful flag had been hijacked as their symbol of protest," Crapnell said. "And I thought, 'That's not right.'"²⁴

Responding to the decision of the Calgary Police Commission prohibiting CPS members from wearing the Thin Blue Line flag patch, Tom Stamatakis, president of the Canadian Police Association, (and past president of the Vancouver Police Union) drew parallels between protest groups co-opting the Canadian flag and the Thin Blue line flag:

Referencing the recent so-called 'Freedom' protests, Stamatakis said the Canadian flag was co-opted by extremist groups, including white nationalist organizations, in a similar way that the thin blue line patch has been. "Are we going to not fly the Canadian flag? Are we going to remove the Canadian flag from all of the Calgary police uniforms? Where do you go with this?"²⁵

Community Consultation

Pursuant to direction from the Vancouver Police Board, the VPD met with both the Indigenous Advisory Committee and the African Descent VPD Advisory Committee to present the information contained in this report and receive members' feedback on this issue.

The VPD met with the Indigenous Advisory Committee on October 6, 2022, and received thoughtful feedback from committee members.

- Almost all committee members commented on their perception of the Thin Blue Line as a dividing line
 - Us v. them, and we (Indigenous Peoples) are "them"
 - At odds with Indigenous philosophy which is not binary
 - The perception is police are "circling up"
- Many committee members expressed support for police having a symbol promoting pride and unity and recognizing fallen officers
- Some committee members raised the possibility of a new symbol
 - Not a reflection of the VPD – others have ruined the Thin Blue Line symbol
 - Now associated with other acts of racism

²⁴ CBC News, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/flag-convoy-canada-1.6505885> (accessed September 7, 2022)

²⁵ Calgary Herald, <https://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/police-advocacy-group-slams-calgary-police-commissions-thin-blue-line-ban> (accessed September 7, 2022)

- One member said they had previously seen it, liked it and thought it was cool

The VPD met with the African Descent VPD Advisory Committee on October 7, 2022, and received thoughtful feedback from committee members.

The common theme was racialized peoples experience with police and how that informs their view of the Thin Blue Line:

- The challenge is the history of policing and what policing has been around the world – protecting those who “have”
- Impact of policing in Canada on Indigenous People, Chinese and Japanese during WWII
- Most of our rules / laws are based on bias
- Different people have different experiences of police e.g. people in the KKK were police / military / politicians
- There has not been a reckoning within the police – police need to do this
- The symbol is a proxy for how we see the police

At the request of a number of members for further time for consultation with their respective communities, the VPD provided a draft copy of this report and asked for feedback by November 1, 2022. Although no additional feedback has been provided at this time, should additional comments be received, they will be passed on to the Vancouver Police Board for their information.

Conclusion

Canadian police officers, including VPD members and the families of fallen officers, have proudly embraced the Thin Blue Line flag as a patriotic symbol of solidarity and *esprit de corps* in the policing community, as a symbol of their mission in serving and protecting their communities, and to honour members who have made the ultimate sacrifice in carrying out that mission. As the Calgary Police Commission recognized: “...officers wear the thin blue line patch to honour the fallen, support each other and recognize the special role police have in society”. It is not a hate symbol and police officers do not wear it with ill intent or in opposition to any segment of the community.

As can be seen by the variety of patches shown on page nine, other first responders in Canada, including fire, ambulance, dispatchers and search and rescue along with corrections and the military have adopted their own version of the Thin Blue Line flag to express their pride and *esprit de corps*.

Significant social and political events in the U.S. have seen the U.S. version of the Thin Blue Line flag co-opted by counter movements in response to people calling for racial and social justice and police accountability in that country, similar to how the Canadian flag was recently co-opted by the "Freedom Convoy". Consequently, some community members associate the Canadian Thin Blue Line flag with the U.S. version, and its use by counter movements in the U.S. in the same way that Canadians currently feel some uncertainty about the meaning of our national flag. In this rapidly developing and passionate context, the proud and well-intentioned display of the Thin Blue Line flag by Canadian police officers has generated concern and controversy.