



# Tony Bouza

True police reform requires merciless truth, accuracy and determined chief who will take on union

An interview on Minneapolis police reform

*March 26, 2021*

On March 26, 2021, the Civic Caucus interviewed former Minneapolis Police Chief Tony Bouza. In 1979, Bouza was tapped as an outsider and reformer by Mayor Don Fraser to

tackle rampant problems dogging the Minneapolis Police Department. These problems followed years of what Bouza describes as "rank cronyism" and the worst spoils system in American policing history. Lessons learned then remain contemporary and relevant.

In his trademark honest and outspoken fashion, Chief Bouza lays out the issues he faced while chief and his ideas for the present. He states that the killing of George Floyd would not have happened under Mayor Fraser. He says the case provides a stark example that governing matters and bad governing is extremely costly in many ways. Bouza sees the biggest challenge in American policing as how to control the small percentage of bad cops he calls "thumpers." He strongly asserts that the only way to do so is through a determined chief of police who will take on the union.

### **Notes of the Discussion**

(Remarks, questions and responses are edited.)

## Background

**00:00 - The Civic Caucus** (Janis Clay)

**00:48 - Introduction of Tony Bouza** (Paul Ostrow)

Former Minneapolis Police Chief Tony Bouza was born in Spain and moved to the U.S. at the age of nine. He served in the New York City Police Department from 1953 to 1976, reaching the rank of Assistant Chief and Commander of the Bronx. He went on to serve as Deputy Chief of the New York Transit Police.

In 1980, following a series of scandals under his predecessor, newly elected Mayor Don Fraser looked for an outsider and reformer to head the Minneapolis Police Department. Mayor Fraser tapped Tony Bouza, who served for nine years and subsequently went on to head the Minnesota Gaming Association. Following his retirement, Chief Bouza has been a prolific writer, speaker, and expert on issues of police accountability, culture and reform. He has written nine books and is a **frequent contributor to the South Side Pride newspaper.**

**02:50 - Opening Remarks.** (Tony Bouza)

**Bouza:** My perspective was formed by arriving in the United States as an impoverished immigrant. The United States educated and enriched me. I've tried to give back through police reform, devoting my entire life from 1953 until now to analyzing the problems and trying to make the police a better institution and more responsive to our wonderful democracy.

My selection as Minneapolis chief in 1979 illustrates issues that remain to this day to dog the police department, including the power of the union and racism. The United States faces two fundamental problems: racism and huge income disparity. The George Floyd case is focusing great attention on the issue of racism in American. I see Colin Kaepernick more than George Floyd as the true hero of today's racial struggle.

**06:04 - What are the problems in policing today? (Tony Bouza)**

**Bouza:** Policing problems today in Minneapolis and elsewhere are much like those when I became chief. Internally, the dynamic is not mechanistic or formulaic and charter reform won't get you there.

In 1969, Minneapolis elected the police union president, Charles Stenvig, as mayor, leading to fateful consequences. Stenvig hired cronies as his police chiefs and launched the worst spoils system in American policing history. Today, a big problem is know-nothing mayors who have no sense of crisis and no interest in making a careful selection or search for a police chief.

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***very difficult to discipline or fire bad police.***

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**The biggest challenge in American policing is how to control what I call "thumpers." Walt McClure, in his paper on police reform, refers to them as "warriors." That's too noble. They are thumpers and instruments of racism in America.** Police unions today make it their principal task to defend these "thumpers." Unions are enormously powerful, with big treasuries, great legislative influence and the ability to make it very difficult to discipline or fire bad police.

Thumpers are alpha male types, "meat-eaters," who lead the charge, kick through the door, are first through a hail of bullets, have a chest full of medals, and are instruments of brutality and racism. Only two to three percent of the department, they set the tone and culture. The rest are just grazers in the field; they go along and they get along.

The George Floyd case is highly symbolic. Floyd was a flawed hero, committing a crime, had drugs in his system and was not cooperative. He was the victim of racism, punished for being Black and the force was excessive. The crime was manslaughter, not murder. Chauvin killed Floyd inadvertently while trying to teach him a lesson and put him in his place.

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***We've got to be mercilessly truthful and accurate in assessing these [policing] issues.***

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We've got to be mercilessly truthful and accurate in assessing these issues. Otherwise, we become Donald Trump all over again, twisting the truth and never getting at the real problem.

The reality is that in Chauvin, we have a "thumper." Can thumpers be controlled? Yes, but you need a determined chief who will take on the union.

It isn't a recruiting problem, not even a training problem. Recruiting is a wonderful filter-it's hard to become a cop in America. Police love what they do; the pay, benefits and pension are good; no one ever quits; and when you try to fire them, you have a problem.

The four cops in the George Floyd case were fired without going through legal process and will visit a humiliation on the city when some reluctant arbitrator must restore them to duty. Then they will go on to be convicted and will be fired legitimately. Firing cops is not as easy as the mayor and police chief made it look - this was a terrible tactical blunder.

**Mayor Jacob Frey has had no curiosity or interest in police reform and was content to hire a caretaker.** Chief Arradondo, is wonderful, charming, intelligent, courteous--but doesn't want to take on the police union. That makes him a loser. Although Black, he is "blue," a product of police culture.

The outgoing union president, Bob Kroll, is a perfect example of a thumper. There is an adversarial relationship between management and the union and the chief must take on the union. I've met with Chief Arradondo and told him so.

**15:23 - Is reform possible?** (Tony Bouza)

**Bouza: Yes, reform is possible. You need a sense of crisis and must select the reformer carefully.** There are very few police reformers in America. The only true reformer I ever encountered was Patrick Murphy, who served 30 months from 1970 to 1973 as New York City Police Chief. Today his memory is widely scorned within police ranks. [**Murphy changed the policy in the New York Police Department on use of force**, permitting use of force only to defend life. This approach became influential across the country.]

We need a full-fledged, knowing debate on the role of police in America. **Policing is in a terrible crisis. It remains too much an instrument of white society controlling Black**

**citizens.** Progress is too slow on racism and income inequality. Some institutions-policing is not one of them-are doing better than others, such as the Ivy League, with its efforts to recruit Blacks. We are making progress, but not fast enough.

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***Defunding the police is not the answer.***

***Managing the police better is .***

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Can the police be controlled? Absolutely! It is a dictatorship, with the only question, What does the dictator do? Murphy proved that it can be done. I hope I did. I would not say so.

Defunding the police is not the answer. Managing the police better is. Our founding fathers were not liberal wimps who did not want law and order; they did. The police should be aggressive, but within the Constitution. Government matters, who is in charge matters.

The most important institution in America is the free and untrammelled press, with the *New York Times* being the best example.

## Discussion

**23:28** - **How can three percent of the officers in a police department dictate the culture of the other 97 percent?** (Paul Ostrow)

**Bouza:** Look at the Floyd case. Who was the leader? Who sets the tone? It happens over and over. Leaders and aggressors can have courage and be heroic, but also racist and flawed. We tend to be too simplistic in our analysis.

**25:08** - **In Camden, New Jersey, police chief J. Scott Thompson reformed the department by adopting a "procedural justice" approach. How can we restore enough authority to the police chief so he can remove officers who are insubordinate to the policy?** (Walt McClure)

**Bouza:** Unions have a lot of money and great legislative and political influence. McClure is absolutely right: it is very difficult to fire police and if you manage it, they get restored. The internal affairs process, and the commander appointed, can be a very important tool in disciplining and exposing bad conduct and promoting transparency and truth.

When I started, for example, there was a big problem of harassing stops of Black drivers. To put an end to that, I started requiring a written report stating probable cause and articulable grounds for the stop. If proper grounds were absent, it was grounds for discipline. Even without being able to fire, the internal affairs process gives a tool for being

in control, and the chief is the dictator, through discipline, promotions, demotions, shifts and assignments. I was determined to be in charge, and I believe there was no doubt I was in charge for the nine years I was in that role. I ruled by fear, but I ruled.

**31:50 - What are your thoughts on bringing in mental health and other social workers to respond to certain calls? (Lee Munnich)**

**Bouza:** Policing must be open and welcoming to new initiatives. Anything that promotes accountability, responsibility and intellectual growth should be welcomed. In 1980, 911 was not an accepted idea. I was a staunch promoter. In the 1970s, there was resistance to women in policing. In 1975, I wrote an article entitled "Women in Policing: An Idea Whose Time has Come," published in the *FBI Bulletin*. I traveled the country testifying that women can be cops and now that revolution is won. We can similarly get to the day when racism will be eliminated in police behavior. Reward and punishment will change behavior.

**34:58 - How do you get the political support necessary to create fundamental change to the police department? (Clarence Shallbetter)**

**Bouza:** That is a wonderful and central question. In 1980, when I began as chief, I had to choose a constituency. I could choose (1) the mayor (the New York model); (2) the union (and become a hero to cops); or (3) "the people," a difficult concept to grasp. I chose "the people," with the press as a vehicle to communicate and convince. People need the truth.

Here, we must understand the complexity of the situation. Floyd was not a pure hero. The cops were not evil. They were summoned there by someone who had been given a counterfeit bill. There was racism, there was a thumper and there were three grazers watching.

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***Today, we have a bloated bureaucracy  
and lack of accountability.***

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I would talk directly to the people, not through a press information officer. Today, we have a bloated bureaucracy and lack of accountability. What police departments do can be measured and there can be accountability. Reform is possible, but you must have control.

**39:30 - We do not elect the police chief or union leaders. Our elected officials, the mayor and council, have managed to absolve themselves of responsibility for the**

**problems in the police department. How can we return accountability to elected officials and hold those we elect responsible for the behavior of the police department?** (Paul Ostrow)

**Bouza:** In 1979, outgoing Mayor Hofstede said he would not run for reelection because he could not control the police. Incoming Mayor Fraser undertook a national search, resolved to expend resources, devote energy, concentrate on the problem and resolve it. That's a model. The fact is that it can be done. It must be prioritized.

We are moving in the right direction-it only took 400 years. People say democracy is the worst system, except for all the others that have been tried.

**42:42** - **You and Don Fraser as police chief and mayor seemed to have a good working relationship and the public understood this. For current Minneapolis mayoral candidates, what should they look for in a police chief? Would they have to abandon current police Chief Medaria Arradondo?** (Pat Davies)

**Bouza:** Fraser was an unusual character. How does America solve its problems? Debate. That's the way you solve every problem in a democracy. We are in a tortured discussion and debate on race right now.

**46:02** - **City Charter reform is set to be a big issue in the coming Minneapolis election. Do you think any of the charter amendments could help to bring about police reform, in particular the proposal from the Charter Commission to provide the mayor with executive authority and make the council's role a legislative one?** (Dana Schroeder)

**Bouza:** Charter reform is a chimera, a mirage in the desert. Liberals believe civilian review boards and charter reform have magical powers. I don't see charter reform as leading anywhere and am not aware of a civilian review board anywhere in America that has ever done a useful thing.

**48:18** - **What about the City Council becoming more involved with the police through their own charter amendment? Is this helpful?** (Paul Gilje)

**Bouza:** The only thing that moves American politicians is a crisis. We are beginning to develop a sense of crisis about policing. The debate is a good one. Out of the debate, reform and reformers will arise. In the end, it's about police management.

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**51:12** - If a good police chief is crucial, who is going to appoint the police chief and how do you get people into that office who are willing to appoint a good chief? (Ted Kolderie)

**Bouza:** Before I answer, I want to say again that the most important institution in America is a free and untrammelled press. What drives people to make a sensible selection? A crisis. Here we have a crisis. But we haven't really begun to analyze the issue-the police union, which has become an evil instrument with the primary role of protecting "thumpers." Competition makes capitalism thrive; there is profit-and-loss accountability. Government does not have that same accountability. Democracy produces some troglodytes. The reality is, we must pick better people.

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**55:26** - Reaching agreement on contracts involves two sides, labor, and management, i.e., the police union and the city. How does the city propose what it wants on the management side and how do we get a public discussion over what we expect from union contracts? (Clarence Shallbetter)

**Bouza:** People are not knowledgeable enough on these matters. The only way toward reform is to fight the union. No one wants to confront a bloated bureaucracy. All anyone asks for is more. I never asked for more cops, all I sought was to make the department I had work better and more efficiently.

**1:00:42** - What about the complete lack of information and transparency? The union contract is never discussed in public, two police killing settlements totaling \$47 million were discussed behind closed doors and our disciplinary process is very secretive. Was it like this during your time and is part of the solution to open the doors to the public to this information? (Paul Ostrow)

**Bouza:** Bravo. Openness, transparency, truth, honesty, responsiveness. Truth is hard. I didn't have a public information officer and directed the press to ask officers directly when they wanted answers.



**1:05:23** - You mentioned crises and that crisis drives change. We have a tendency here to not look back on how we responded to crises in the past and how we might learn from them. What are your thoughts on this? (T Williams)

**Bouza:** Years of repression and suppression of Black America have led to all kinds of consequences, from poverty to crime, substance abuse, anger and protest. Historically, white America has looked to police for control.

The story of the Central Park birder is wonderfully emblematic. A woman summoned the police to Central Park claiming she was being menaced by a Black male, who turned out to be Christian Cooper, a Harvard-educated Black birdwatcher who had politely and reasonably requested she keep her dog leashed. Cooper handled the situation brilliantly. The police responded and acted sensibly. The woman was exposed and lost her dog and her job. Cooper, responsible, intelligent, totally in control, was the hero of that encounter.

## Conclusion

**1:09:28** - Is there anything else you'd like to share with our Civic Caucus readers? (Janis Clay)

**Bouza:** I've lived in other countries. We have something precious here and had better cling to it. I would just say God bless America.

## Present for Zoom interview

Tom Abeles, John Adams, Helen Baer, Janis Clay (chair), Lyn Carlson, Pat Davies, Ed Dirkswager, Paul Gilje, Randy Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Walt McClure, Lee Munnich, Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Joe Selvaggio, Clarence Shallbetter, T Williams.