

Kshama's Speech to City Council on the Carmen Best Appointment

August 13, 2018

Today's police chief appointment takes place in the context of longstanding and deep-seated problems of racist policing and excessive use of force.

These are not problems of a few "bad apples". There are deep systemic problems here and Seattle, alongside a nationwide epidemic. We see a mass incarceration system rooted in institutionalized racism, which locks up black and brown, working class and LGBTQ people, at highly disproportionate rates.

SPD has a long record of using excessive force, including the brutal killing of John T. Williams. This resulted in a 2012 federal consent decree. Later it led to the appointment of a new Police Chief, Kathleen O'Toole, in June of 2014.

At the time O'Toole was appointed, there were high expectations among many in the community. Every councilmember except for myself voted for O'Toole.

At that time, I warned that O'Toole was not prepared to carry out the kind of fundamental change needed.

Unfortunately, these warnings were borne out by subsequent events.

We saw excessive use of force against Black Lives Matter protesters. We saw the killings of Che Taylor and Charleena Lyles. We saw O'Toole and former mayor Murray deploy SPD officers to the SeaTac airport, effectively defending Donald Trump's racist Muslim Travel Ban against 5,000 peaceful protesters.

I am not convinced that Chief Best is prepared to carry out the kind of fundamental transformation that is needed, as I was not convinced with O'Toole, and I was certainly not convinced by any of the other finalists for this position.

I was stunned by the disgraceful appointment process that was carried out under Mayor Durkan. Ironically, the Mayor's process of shortlisting candidates itself became an infamous example of

the systemic issues faced by black and brown people.

I agree with Nikkita Oliver, and others who called out that process for its undemocratic and racist elimination of Best from the finalists, and who joined in the public outcry and organizing which forced Mayor Durkan to include her.

This anger at the selection process flows from long-standing calls from so many in our community for fundamental changes in the SPD to address the institutional racism and endemic violence. Our starting point is to clearly and openly acknowledge the severity of the ongoing problems of racial bias and excessive use of force in Seattle.

I asked Carmen Best in last week's committee meeting, if she herself acknowledged them. Unfortunately, she was not prepared to agree. I finally asked her for a simple "yes or no" answer, and she said refused, saying it was, quote: "so much more complex than that."

In the committee meeting, I asked interim Chief Best about the incident at SeaTac airport... she responded, quote: "we have mutual aid agreements" unquote and that quote "when it comes to the issue at hand, whatever that issue is, we can't take a position." unquote

"Mutual aid" sounds nice and neutral. But what happened at SeaTac was not nice or neutral.

I personally witnessed what took place: pepper spray in the eyes of completely peaceful protesters, the forceful pushing of bicycles in peoples faces. I saw one woman's hair was yanked by a police officer. People were physically forced out of the terminal, one intimidating step at a time.

I think this gets at something very important about what our movement is up against and the nature of the police and the state under capitalism.

This is not a case of good and bad apples - the whole tree is rotten. The police and the state under capitalism enforce the interests of the billionaire class, and do so with far more brutal and bloody force than what happened that day at the airport.

But even under capitalism there are things that could be done immediately by Chief Best to mitigate some of the worst abuses of this system, if she were prepared to.

One of the most important changes our movement advocates for is to implement a democratically elected community oversight board, with full powers over the police, including over department policy, while having the ability to subpoena officers. Best has NOT advocated for this.

Best has said that she is against the “criminalization of homelessness”. But I have not heard any rejection of homeless sweeps. That is truly unfortunate, because it’s clear that Mayor Durkan is preparing to further expand this totally inhumane policy.

I agree with Nikkita Oliver, who said. Quote: “I heard from the finalists at a meeting Wednesday night at Not This Time. They all essentially said the same thing. They will fire racist police. They will put more training and tools in police officers hands. They will do implicit bias training. They will involve community. None of what any candidate said is new. We have literally heard all of this before and it plays out in the exact same way every time. Black and brown ppl over policed and murdered. I want to hear someone talk boldly about the roots of policing and how they intend to uproot them.” Unquote.

However, while I know this may surprise many, I will be voting “yes” today on Best’s nomination. As I’m sure is already clear from my comments, my “yes” vote does not represent a vote of confidence that the fundamental system changes will be carried out.

What my vote does represent is a vote of solidarity with my black and brown fellow community members who, overwhelmingly, have urged me to not stand in the way of Best’s appointment. Over the last two weeks, I have consulted a broad range of allies in the struggle against racism and police repression. Many of them share my skepticism.

At the same time, without the movement activists standing up and protesting the secretive and racist selection process which initially sidelined Best, we would be having a very different conversation today. I can understand the feeling of many in the African American community in Seattle who see Best’s appointment as the city’s first permanent black chief, against the initial resistance of the

establishment, as a blow against the status quo and against the racist record of this department.

My vote today is a vote of solidarity and unity with the movement that forced the Mayor to reverse herself, and it is also an appeal to stay united in stepping up the struggle.

I hope others who back Best’s appointment will join me in making absolutely clear that, if anything, the movement’s victory over the Mayor’s selection process – the fight that got us here today – should give everyone confidence in our power to win far more important and fundamental changes. It will require organizing and action far beyond what Chief Best will be prepared to support.

In voting “yes” today, I do so with this clear warning to our community and to our movement: We should in no way view this appointment with any illusions that it will lead to fundamental change.

Our movements will be the key to holding the Seattle police accountable. We will need to be organized and determined and relentless in our struggle.

We will need to continue to fight against youth incarceration and the New Youth Jail. We will need to fight for a democratically elected community oversight board with full powers over the police. We will need to fight to tax big business and the wealthy to fully fund quality K-12 public schools, and free college and vocational education, for a major expansion of youth jobs programs to provide a future for young people under this broken system and to address the poverty and massive inequality that are at the roots of crime.

The fight against the North Seattle Police Precinct, or police bunker, is an inspiring example of what will be needed. Led by anti-police brutality activists, that fight brought together a large coalition, calling itself “Block the Bunker,” and built unity against the construction of this \$160 million, bomb-proof facility, and argued instead for that money to be spent on social needs: on affordable housing, homelessness services, youth jobs. The movement organized with determination and faced down the whole Seattle establishment, and ultimately we won – at least for now. And a part of that coalition went on to fight for that money to be used to build 1,000 homes instead, to keep the bunker permanently blocked. We did not

win everything we fought for, but scored a huge victory in winning \$29 million for affordable housing.

We will have to continue the fight against the bunker – because it’s clear the establishment is itching to go forward with it.

We will have to continue our fight for justice for Che Taylor and Charleena Lyle’s families. We will

continue the fight for an end to the system of mass incarceration, locally, nationally, globally. We will win change through building powerful mass movements, not by placing our faith in any part of the state, the police, or the political establishment. And we will have to fight for an alternative to capitalism, which has racism, misogyny, homophobia and violence built into its core.