

Turban policy used to reflect cultural mix, court told

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An RCMP policy allowing officers to wear turbans evolved because the force wanted to reflect the multicultural nature of Canada, a Calgary court heard Thursday.

The RCMP move to create an exemption for Sikh officers from wearing the force's traditional hats began as early as 1982, retired deputy commissioner Roy Moffat testified.

"(The force) should reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of Canada," Moffat quoted from a memo sent to him by Chief Commissioner Norman Inkster in 1987.

By 1989, the force had developed the policy of allowing turbans except in situations where helmets or other headgear is required by law.

Moffat's testimony came during the third day of a court challenge of the policy.

The challenge was launched by three retired Lethbridge RCMP officers and the spouse of another. They argue allowing Sikh officers to wear turbans fosters an unhealthy mix of church and state.

Only one Sikh officer currently wears a turban with the RCMP's traditional scarlet tunic.

A successful challenge will "turn back the clock" to an undesirable state, said Drew Schroeder, a lawyer for the World Sikh Organization.

But Peter Manning, an expert on policing from Michigan State University, said allowing turbans could disrupt the force's ability to enforce the law.

The public's perception of the RCMP as a neutral force could be compromised by the religious symbol, he said.