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J.P.'S PUNISHMENT 'PROFOUND INJUSTICE'

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London justice of the peace **Len Obokata**, who twice grabbed the breast of a female colleague, was handed a 30-day suspension yesterday without pay but with benefits.

Women's advocates criticized the disciplinary penalty, calling it a "profound injustice" and far too lenient.

Obokata, 55, will also be required to take a course in gender equity issues as a condition of continuing to sit as a justice of the peace.

He is to be reimbursed for legal costs of the rare inquiry held in September under the Justices of the Peace Act, which was not a criminal proceeding.

Yesterday's ruling was by Superior Court Justice Cathy Mocha.

Mocha presided at the inquiry.

The ruling drew harsh criticism from Londoners involved in the fight against abuse of women.

"It's a profound injustice to know that somebody who's acknowledged and recognized as a harasser would have the privilege of having his legal costs paid," said Barb MacQuarrie, community development co-ordinator of the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children at the University of Western Ontario.

"It sends a mixed message that he's not completely responsible for this and the bench will take some responsibility and that's so inappropriate," she said.

Megan Walker, executive director of the London Abused Women's Centre, said Obokata should have lost his job.

"I'm concerned that he's allowed to go back to that position which is a position of power, where his work gives him authority to have an impact on women's lives," said Walker.

"I'm not certain how objective he can be and how committed he is to the issue of woman abuse when he's been found to be guilty of an offence of this magnitude."

Walker said she's particularly concerned Obokata was shown leniency that wouldn't have been extended to someone not connected with the justice system.

"I always look to people in the criminal justice system to be held to a higher standard," Walker said.

"I feel in this case the standard was lowered to accommodate him and that's disappointing."

Penalties could have ranged from removing Obokata from the bench to a warning, reprimand or suspension.

The incident occurred last May when Obokata was walking back to his downtown Toronto hotel after having dinner with four other justices of the peace attending an education conference.

In an agreed statement of facts, Obokata acknowledged he'd been drinking and was walking and chatting with a woman, identified only as "justice of the peace X" to protect her identity.

Obokata suddenly grabbed the woman's breast and squeezed it, causing her to exclaim "Lenny, I can't believe you did that!"

Obokata then repeated the action.

The victim did not report the incident to police, but five weeks later filed a complaint with a disciplinary council, saying she felt "angry, shocked, hurt, humiliated and cheapened" by the incident.

Obokata's lawyer, Tim Price, argued at the hearing his client should keep his job because it was an isolated incident and a "lower-level sexual offence."

Gavin MacKenzie, council for the commission of inquiry hearing the complaint, told the hearing "it is fair to ask whether a complainant in a sexual assault case would have confidence in justice of the peace Obokata."

In her ruling, Mocha lashed out at Obokata, saying the incident not only casts doubt on his judgment in sexual assault cases, but also "casts doubt on his respect for the law, casts doubt on his morality, casts doubt on his ability to feel empathy."