



R v Fearon – Majority v. Dissent Excerpts¹

Majority

The Court affirmed that the common law power to search incident to a lawful arrest without a warrant is a powerful and important tool for law enforcement that can allow police to prevent harm to officers, the public and the arrested and prevent the destruction of evidence. Four of the seven SCC judges found that searching a cell phone during an arrest should be allowed without a warrant under certain conditions, in order to meet important law enforcement goals.

Justice Cromwell, on behalf of the majority, sought to define “the point at which the ‘public’s interest in being left alone by government must give way to the government’s interest in intruding on the individual’s privacy in order to advance its goals, notably those of law enforcement.” For the majority, the key question was whether the common law power underpinning a cell phone search incident to arrest was reasonable. Historically, the Court has affirmed that reasonable searches within the scope of this power do not violate s. 8 of the *Charter*. To ensure this power does not encroach upon the guarantees in s. 8, the Court held that police officers will be justified in searching a cell phone or similar device incidental to arrest only if:

1. The arrest was lawful;
2. The search is truly incidental to the arrest in that the police have a reason based on a valid law enforcement purpose to conduct the search, and that reason is objectively reasonable. The valid law enforcement purposes in this context are:
 - Protecting the police, the accused, or the public;
 - Preserving evidence; or
 - Discovering evidence, including locating additional suspects, in situations in which the investigation would be significantly impeded without the ability to promptly search the cell phone at the time of the arrest;
3. The nature and the extent of the search are tailored to the purpose of the search; and
4. The police take detailed notes of what they have examined on the device and how it was searched.

Applying these conditions to Mr. Fearon’s case, the majority found that:

- (1) The arrest was lawful, as he had been arrested for robbery;
- (2) The search was truly incidental to the arrest, as it was carried out for valid law enforcement reasons such as locating a gun used in the crime, protecting the public and discovering additional suspects or evidence;

¹ Excerpts Summarized by Ontario Justice Education Network, 2016



(3) The nature and extent of the search was appropriate for these law enforcement goals, because it was a brief search of recent cell phone applications that were open at the time of the search and it was reasonable to believe that information related to the purpose of the arrest might be discovered in this way; but

(4) Police failed to take adequate notes about what they examined and how they conducted the search.

The majority held that the failure to take adequate notes constituted a violation of Mr. Fearon's rights under s. 8. Because it found this infringement, the Court had to determine whether the evidence against Mr. Fearon should be excluded. To do this, it weighed Mr. Fearon's privacy interest in this case against the public interest in having the case decided on its merits. The Court determined that the public's interest was greater than Mr. Fearon's and retained the evidence against him.

Dissent

Contrastingly, three dissenting judges found that the most urgent of the law enforcement goals in searching a cell phone without a warrant could already be met by other means. They reasoned that the amount and personal nature of information that can be stored on digital devices means that individuals have an extraordinarily high privacy interest in them, and that warrantless searches should only be permitted under much more urgent conditions than those laid out by the majority.

The three dissenting judges found that the encroachment on privacy posed by the search of cell phones incidental to an arrest is much more dire and violating than the sort of search that is otherwise justified under the common law power. They argued that while generally, law enforcement objectives outweigh the already diminished privacy interest of the accused, there is a quantitative and qualitative difference when the object of the search is a digital device that has a larger data storage capacity. This means that even if police are acting in good faith, there is a significant risk of privacy violations not connected to the valid reasons for the arrest.

Writing for the minority, Justice Karakatsanis found that police should be required to obtain a warrant in all but the most urgent circumstances. As an alternative to the four conditions laid out by the majority, the minority proposed that a warrantless search is permissible only when:

- (1) The police have a reasonable belief that searching the device could prevent an imminent threat to safety; or
- (2) The police have reasonable grounds to believe that searching the device could prevent the imminent loss or destruction of evidence.

In reaching this conclusion, the minority noted that these powers already exist in the common law and that police still have the option of seizing cell phones without searching them to preserve what evidence they might hold until they can lawfully obtain a warrant to search them.



The minority found that the police did not have reasonable grounds to believe that searching the phone could have prevented imminent harm or the destruction of evidence, and would have excluded the photo and text message evidence against Mr. Fearon.