

**Evidence of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security,
Hearing on Bill C-391, Thursday, May 27, 2010**

Hon. Jacques Dupuis (Minister of Public Safety, Government of Québec):

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. You have no reason to apologize. I was watching the show, I didn't have to participate; it's almost like a vacation for me.

Voices: Ah, ah!

Hon. Jacques Dupuis: But I have to tell you that it bears a close resemblance to what happens from time to time back home. So, please do not apologize; we understand these things.

First of all, allow me to thank you for your invitation to appear. Since 2006, the federal government has shown clear signs of its intention to abolish the registration of non-restricted firearms. Indeed, three bills in pursuit of that objective have been introduced by the government, and two others have been introduced by Conservative members of Parliament. Moreover, in May of 2006, the federal government declared an amnesty, which it has renewed every year since then, thereby contributing to weaker enforcement of the Firearms Act.

The Government of Quebec has made known, on a number of occasions, that it considers the maintenance of the Canadian Firearms Registry, in its entirety, to be essential. Three motions to that effect have been passed unanimously by the National Assembly of Quebec.

In addition, my presence here today before your Committee is in keeping with the commitment I made to form a common front with the Quebec police organizations and with associations and various other groups which are demanding that the Canadian Firearms Registry be maintained in its entirety.

The Government of Quebec has been particularly proactive itself over the past few years in the area of controlling firearms. After the shooting that occurred at Dawson College, in Montreal, on September 13, 2006, Quebec passed the *Act to Protect Persons With Regard to Activities Involving Firearms*, commonly referred to as "Anastasia's Law", in memory of Anastasia De Sousa who died during that tragic event. The Act aims, in particular, to enhance the reporting of high-risk behaviours in connection with firearms. It also brought in a good many operational measures, including the creation, in 2008, of a joint investigation unit to combat trafficking in firearms, ammunition and explosives, whose work is coordinated by the Sûreté du Québec.

Contrary to certain claims that are being made, non-restricted firearms are not used exclusively by honest law-abiding citizens. From 2003 to 2009, these weapons were involved in nearly 2,000 violent offences in Quebec. During the same period, 45 homicides were committed in Quebec, and at least 534 people were the victims of robbery involving a rifle or shotgun. In 2009, of the 1,476 offences committed against persons, and considered to have been committed with a firearm in Quebec, 274 were perpetrated with a non-restricted firearm.

There are a number of reasons why the mandatory registration of non-restricted firearms should be maintained.

First of all, the Canadian Firearms Registry contributes to the prevention of tragedies and crimes against persons. In Quebec, between 2007 and 2009, we identified 169 spousal violence events involving shotguns or rifles, while there were 122 involving handguns.

The statistics also reveal that, of the suicides committed using a firearm, 9 out of 10 involved a non-restricted firearm. In fact, coroners have recommended that the Canadian Firearms Registry be maintained, following suicides committed with non-restricted firearms in Quebec.

When police officers respond in these situations, consulting the Canadian Firearms Registry enables them to quickly find out if the persons involved own one or more firearms, and if so, to remove them for preventive purposes.

The Registry also makes it possible to ensure compliance and monitoring of prohibition orders. Under the Criminal Code, orders prohibiting the possession of firearms may be imposed when a person is convicted of a violent crime or, for preventive purposes, when the person's mental state poses a risk to that person or to others. In the past three years, 1,042 prohibition orders have been imposed upon owners of non-restricted firearms in Quebec.

In the event that the long gun registry were abolished, the police would have to carry out more in-depth investigations in order to determine whether persons covered by an order own a non-restricted firearm, which would involve additional costs for law enforcement.

 (1600)

The Registry also contributes to protecting persons who are mentally disturbed, and those close to them. Indeed, in Quebec, universal registration enables the Chief Firearms Officer to verify whether firearms are possessed by persons under an application for an order to confine them to an institution, or calling for a psychiatric assessment.

Under Anastasia's Law, the Chief Firearms Officer is systematically informed of these applications. Between January 1, 2008 and March 31, 2010, 13,383 applications for orders were reported to him, and consultation of the Registry made it possible to conduct 1,193 interventions to ensure the safety of persons.

The Canadian Firearms Registry also constitutes an essential tool for police investigations and interventions. Consultation of the Registry assists in making informed decisions during police operations, in particular by making it possible to find out how many and what type of firearms belong to the individuals targeted by their interventions, and to act accordingly.

In fact, between 2006 and 2008, the Surety du Québec's Tactical Response Unit intervened in 125 operations where a suspect was in possession of a firearm, 81 of these involving suspects armed with a non-restricted firearm—in other words, in two out of every three interventions. According to the latest statistics for 2010, the Registry is queried more than 600 times per day by police officers in Quebec.

The registration of non-restricted firearms is also an important tool for police investigations. Indeed, a query of the Registry may serve as the starting point of an investigation when a firearm is recovered at a crime scene, and also contribute to establishing the chain of possession.

Thus far, 1,507,874 non-restricted firearms have been registered by individuals in Quebec, accounting for 95% of all firearms registered in Quebec. Abolishing the registration of non-restricted firearms would cause us to lose track of these weapons.

Moreover, the importance of the traceability of firearms is recognized, under international law, by two treaties initiated by the United Nations and the Organization of American States, both of which have been signed by Canada. The purpose of these treaties is to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit manufacturing of, and trafficking in, firearms, particularly through "marking", which facilitates the traceability and identification of each firearm.

Whereas at the international level, Canada has made a commitment to ensure the traceability of firearms that are subject to transnational transactions, it is paradoxical to note that, at the domestic level, Canada is pursuing a policy aiming to abolish a tool that facilitates that very traceability of firearms within the country.

The Registry is also a useful tool for decision-making by criminal prosecutors—for example, in setting the conditions for the release of an accused, so as to enhance the protection of victims and of the public at large.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I think it is appropriate to recall the circumstances that led to the creation of the current firearms control system in Canada: the École polytechnique tragedy, and many similar events in the United States and elsewhere around the world. Abolishing the Registry would affect the international reputation of Canada, a country that is a leader in the area of firearms control.

I would also like to remind you that the Government of Quebec's position is supported by the police organizations in Quebec, by a number of organizations working in the area of public safety and security, and by the families of the victims of tragedies that have occurred in Quebec. Ms. Suzanne Laplante-Edward and Ms. Louise De Sousa, the mothers of Anne-Marie and Anastasia respectively, are, in fact, with us today.

I also wish to underscore that although the Government of Quebec is against abolishing the mandatory registration of non-restricted firearms, it in no way questions the legitimacy of activities such as hunting, when practised in compliance with the law. The registration of a

firearm may take only a few minutes, and is free of charge. The amount of effort required of farmers or hunters is far outweighed by the resulting benefits for society as a whole in terms of public safety.

I have laid out before you the many reasons, with supporting statistics, which have convinced me that the cause defended by Quebec today is important and just.

 (1605)

Yet as a backdrop to this sometimes theoretical argument stands the suffering and dismay of those affected by tragedies caused by firearms—those who are still grieving over the loss of loved ones, or who daily relive tragedies that they will never be able to forget.

As I mentioned, some of those people are here with me today. You are no doubt aware that Quebec has been particularly hard hit by tragic events that have forevermore left their mark on our collective memory.

I will close on this; I promise.

From that perspective, if the registration of non-restricted firearms were to save just one life, from a moral standpoint, its maintenance would be justified. And if you have any doubts about the relevance of that assertion, I invite you to speak to Suzanne Edward and Louise De Sousa.

Thank you very much.