

## Gun registry worth fixing

**LEE PROKASKA**

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

(Nov 9, 2009)

Some debates are unending. Some debates take on added gravitas when laws might change.

The gun control debate will become more substantive -- and more heated -- given the passage of a private member's bill that would kill the controversial long-gun registry established by the Liberals after the December, 1989, massacre of 14 women at a Montreal college.

The House of Commons voted in principle last week to end the long-gun registry. The minority Conservative government couldn't have passed Bill C-391 -- sponsored by MP Candice Hoepfner, a Tory backbencher from Manitoba -- without support from 12 New Democrats, eight Liberals and one Independent. The Liberals and the NDP allowed a free vote on the bill.

That's not surprising because both parties are conflicted on gun control. Although Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff says his party continues to support "the principle" of gun control, that support has been difficult for MPs from rural areas of the country, where farmers and hunters tend to cluster.

Now that the bill has passed second reading, it will go to a Commons committee for study and possible amendment. There is no doubt the national debate -- at committee and among members of the public -- will be heated. Stephen Harper's Conservatives have long said the registry is a billion-dollar waste that targets honest gun-owners and does little -- or nothing -- to fight crime. On the other hand, proponents such as police and victims' rights groups argue the registry is a good investigative tool and has led to more responsible gun ownership.

The issue of guns -- legal and illegal alike -- is a hot-button topic that elicits strong emotions, strong language and strong politics. Harper has made no effort to hide the fact his party wants to dismantle the gun registry completely. But owning a gun is no more a right in Canada than driving a car. Both are examples of privileges Canadians may earn. Privileges come with responsibility -- what some folks might call baggage. Car ownership, for example, includes the responsibility to be registered. Access to that databank of registered car owners -- by, for example, police services -- can be both useful and, in some cases, necessary. It seems sensible and reasonable, then, that Canada have some system of listing legally owned weapons.

Given the amount of money that has already been poured into the long-gun registry, it seems a waste of taxpayer funds to simply abolish it. Isn't it more sense and more useful in the long run for committee debate on Hoepfner's bill to focus more on how to fix what we already have, rather than scrap it? We need to move forward on the gun issue, not backward.

Legal gun owners say a registry does nothing to stem the flow of illegal firearms into the country. But that doesn't mean it's not worth knowing who has what when it comes to guns. And if a gun is legally owned, it shouldn't be such a burden to register it.