

Scrapping long-gun registry is pandering to vocal minority

By Stephen Hume, Vancouver Sun

November 9, 2009 1:09 AM

Will Canadians ignore the irony of Parliament scrapping the long-gun registry the day before two more mass shootings in the United States and just before the 20th anniversary of the massacre of 14 women by a man with a rifle at a Montreal university?

Prime Minister Stephen Harper had better hope so because the stratagem of using a private member's bill is a transparent attempt to subvert what Canadians clearly want while evading accountability for the decision.

The biggest risk for Harper's Conservatives will be how women react, since women are predominantly victims of murder by long gun, a fact conveniently overlooked in mostly male anger over the registry.

Yet an Ipsos Reid poll in 2006 found three out of four Canadians want stricter, not more permissive, gun controls. Most agree the gun registry is flawed. They want it fixed, not dismantled to appease special interests.

The poll -- taken in the aftermath of a rampage at Dawson College by a man with a rifle -- was unequivocal.

Parliament's vote to lift registration requirements would affect non-restricted weapons, one of three categories of firearms defined in the Criminal Code, all of which now must be registered.

Non-restricted weapons have the easiest possession and licensing requirements and include rifles and shotguns normally used for hunting and pest and predator control.

The other categories -- which would still have to be registered -- are restricted firearms such as handguns and semi-automatic weapons; and prohibited weapons, such as automatic weapons (sometimes called machine-guns) or converted automatic weapons.

While all categories of weapons can under some circumstances be possessed by private citizens, the requirement that non-restricted firearms be registered has been the source of continuing controversy among hunters and in rural Canada.

Most Canadians reject rural arguments that only handguns -- the assumed weapon of choice for urban criminals -- need to be controlled because rifles and shotguns are just benign implements in

the hands of sober, law-abiding rural citizens who watch the crime waves in the cities and shake their wiser heads.

Nor will most buy the gun lobby's argument that guns defend us from criminals. A 2009 study published in the American Journal of Public Health shows that on average, guns don't protect their owners -- in fact, they are four times more likely to be shot than somebody unarmed.

Property crimes dominate in urban settings. Criminal gangsters are more likely to be shot by another criminal with a restricted firearm in a city.

But recent studies in both the U.S. and Canada confirm that rates of domestic violence are comparable in urban and rural settings and a 2007 federal study reports that homicide rates in rural Canada are consistently high and that small-town Canada has higher overall crime rates than large cities.

Furthermore, statistics show clearly that women are more likely to be murdered with a long gun than with a handgun. So much for the myth of the big, bad city and the moral superiority of a tranquil country life.

Now let's dispel the myth of the long gun as a benign farm, subsistence and sporting implement.

On its website, the RCMP posts sobering statistics about long guns and their relationship to violence.

Fifty-two per cent of the firearms recovered by police in relation to criminal incidents were non-restricted rifles and shotguns, according to a study conducted by police departments in New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario and Saskatchewan.

Fifty-four per cent of firearms homicides from 1974 to 1997 were committed with non-restricted rifles and shotguns.

Eighty-five per cent of domestic homicides involving firearms were committed with a non-restricted rifle or shotgun. According to a 2007 study of family violence by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, the victims of murder or attempted murder by a spouse or ex-spouse were women 87 per cent of the time.

Seventy-four per cent of firearms recovered from suicides and suicide attempts were unrestricted rifles and shotguns.

These statistics tell us that the decision by parliamentarians to scrap the long-gun registry is ideologically based pandering to a self-serving myth held by a minority of Conservatives and amplified by intense lobbying from a special interest group.

Getting rid of the long-gun registry isn't what most Canadians want. They want a registry covering all firearms and they want one that provides law officers with effective tools to reduce all firearm violence, rural as well as urban.