

FIREARMS LEGISLATION

Gun registry is just as costly under Tories as Liberals Amnesty program promised in last election hasn't trimmed \$70-million annual budget

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OTTAWA -- The Conservative government is spending just as much on the controversial gun registry as the Liberals did the year before they left office, even though rifle and shotgun owners are no longer forced to register those weapons.

One year after Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day launched an amnesty so that long-gun owners no longer face penalties for failing to register with a system he called "costly and ineffective," the cost is the same as the \$70-million spent in the last year of Paul Martin's Liberal government.

"We are paying the same amount of money for a system that is gradually deteriorating," Bloc Québécois public safety critic Serge Ménard said yesterday.

At the same time, the Conservative government has not yet tried to pass a bill that it tabled one year ago, last June 19, to formally scrap the long-gun registry. Recently, opposition parties have vowed to defeat the bill.

In the last election campaign, the Conservatives complained the registry system had cost \$2-billion - Auditor-General Sheila Fraser later pegged it at \$946-million over 10 years - and promised they would save money by scrapping the long-gun registry.

"The wasteful long-gun registry must end and the money must be redirected to genuine law-enforcement priorities," the Tory campaign platform pledged.

But, according to the government's published figures, actual spending is not going down from year to year.

The public accounts for the 2005-06 fiscal year - the last year of the Martin government - show that the Canada Firearms Centre spent \$70.5-million. The Conservative government's spending estimates for this year say that the centre spent \$71.6-million in 2006-07 and plans to spend \$70.4-million in 2007-08, the current fiscal year.

The same estimates indicate that Mr. Day's amnesty announcement cost the government \$21.5-million in refunds in 2006-07 because the Tories also waived many of the licensing and registration fees charged to gun owners.

That sum was \$13.5-million more than the total fees the centre collected that year.

Although Mr. Day announced last year that he would reduce the centre's budget by \$10-million, spokeswoman Mélisa Leclerc acknowledged yesterday that the centre had already stopped spending that money the year before the Tories took office.

"The budget has remained stable because operational requirements have remained the same," she wrote in an e-mail. She noted that the gun registry still exists, even if the amnesty waived penalties for long-gun owners. Ms. Leclerc said the government does anticipate "further savings" and suggested that there might be even more if the long-gun registry is formally scrapped through legislation.

But critics like Mr. Ménard say the lack of cost-cutting was predictable, and scrapping it through a law will not save money either.

Most spending for what is commonly called the gun registry is actually for the broader firearms program, including screening people who apply for firearms licences, they note.

Liberal public safety critic Sue Barnes said the argument that money would be saved was used in a political effort to sell the scrapping of the long-gun registry - which faced stiff public opposition in some regions, especially rural areas.

Now, a registry that police have asked the government to maintain is gradually growing out of date because of the amnesty, Ms. Barnes said.

"They haven't saved on money. The amnesty is just making it less useful to the police."