

Editorial

Sticking behind the gun registry

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper is putting politics ahead of public safety - again. Last week, his government introduced a bill in the Senate to repeal mandatory registration of rifles and shotguns.

This is his latest attempt to abolish Canada's long-gun registry and make political gains by reopening our nation's unfortunate urban-rural divide over this issue.

Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan argues the registry must be scrapped because it has been proven "ineffective in fighting crime."

Those who actually fight crime don't agree. The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police maintains that weakening any of our nation's gun controls, including the long-gun registry, would "seriously compromise" safety. The chiefs also challenged Van Loan's assertion that rifles and shotguns are not weapons of choice for criminals. On the contrary, said the chiefs, they are "the weapons most often used in domestic homicides."

Van Loan further dismisses the registry as a "misdirection of resources." But the real misdirection is the effort the Conservatives have spent trying to get rid of a basic and reasonable requirement that owners register all their guns, no matter the length of the barrel.

The Conservatives tried to gut the gun registry in both 2006 and 2007 and again earlier this year, this time via a private member's bill sponsored by Saskatchewan backbencher Garry Breitkreuz. (That bill, when introduced, didn't stop at getting rid of the long-gun registry; it sought to loosen controls on handguns and automatic weapons as well.) And now, there's a government bill in the Senate.

Given the Conservatives' unquenchable desire to weaken our gun laws, it's welcome news that Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff has indicated that his party will oppose both the private member's bill in the Commons and the government bill in the Senate.

This took courage on Ignatieff's part, because some Liberals from rural ridings will feel the heat. At least the Conservatives are counting on that. But upholding the sensible requirement for gun owners to register their weapons is an important principle for the Liberals to stand on.

It's hard to make the argument for the gun registry any better than Steven Chabot, president of the association of chiefs of police, who wrote in a letter to Harper last month: "All guns are potentially dangerous, all gun owners need to be licensed, all guns need to be registered, and gun owners need to be accountable for their firearms."

Unfortunately, Harper and the Conservatives, in their drive to lock up rural and Western votes, refuse to acknowledge this.