

Firearms registry helps protect women

By Leslie M. Tutty, For The Calgary Herald
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Ending violence against women takes more than a white ribbon. Recent high-profile domestic incidents in the province should have sparked efforts on the part of politicians to make Canadian women safer. Instead, we stand on the cusp of passing a bill that would grossly weaken our gun control laws, and jeopardize the safety of women and children.

Debates will soon begin in Ottawa on Bill C-301 that aims to eliminate the registration of long guns, extend the length of the gun licence and weaken controls on prohibited guns (such as AK-47) as well as restricted guns (handguns and semi-automatic). While it is presented as a private member's bill, the prime minister was reported asking members of the gun lobby at the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunter's annual meeting to pressure their MPs so that the opposition would support abolishing the gun registry. In the House of Commons, only 11 votes are needed from the opposition parties to pass this bill. If the opposition does not show true leadership and stand up for public safety, they will bear responsibility for helping to dismantle gun control in Canada.

The RCMP emergency response team recently stated that, compared to previous years, there has been an increase in gun-related calls--including domestic violence calls--in rural Alberta in 2008. Long guns are the firearms most often used to kill women and children in domestic violence situations. Bill C-301 is proposing to allow licensed owners to buy as many guns as they want without having their name associated to them. While there would be little to prevent owners from giving those guns to individuals without licences, it would also be nearly impossible to take preventive measures to remove guns when risks are known and to enforce prohibition orders.

As the Alberta Court of Appeal noted, gun control is a women's issue: women represent a small percentage of Canada's two million gun owners, but they account for a high percentage of the victims of gun violence. Firearms resulted in 32 spousal homicides in 2004--in 1991 when controls on rifles and shotguns were first introduced 85 women were murdered in domestic violence tragedies. For every woman who is killed, many more are threatened and intimidated. The presence of a firearm is one of the most significant risk factors for spousal homicide in domestic violence situations. Though it may be inconvenient for gun owners to go through the one-time procedure to register firearms, clearly, the registry is necessary to women's safety.

Several years ago, I conducted a study of the nature of firearms in 41 domestically violent relationships in Alberta for the Department of Justice Canadian Firearms Centre. The results clarified that while most firearms owners do not abuse their partners, when abusers do own firearms, the increased fear and threat of homicide increases. Several

aspects of the firearms registration process that were implemented to better protect abused women will be lost if the registry is eliminated.

Our current gun control law has made Canada a safer place and should be strengthened, not undermined. Although it is difficult to prove prevention, we do know that in 2008 alone more than 2,200 licences were refused or revoked for safety reasons and thousands of calls were made to the spousal-notification line. We also know police across the country have reported using the system to check for the presence of guns at high-risk situations. Abolishing the long-gun registry could have disastrous effects on society, even more so since the Supreme Court underscored the importance of registration as a means of enforcing the licensing provisions of the law.

It is true that mistakes were made and too much money was spent licensing two million gun owners and registering seven million guns, \$1 billion over 10 years (1995-2005) according to the auditor general. Since then annual costs of the program are reported at approximately \$64 million. Most of the program's spending is attributed to screening and licensing gun owners as RCMP--in charge of administering the program --estimates that eliminating the registration of long arms would save only\$3 million per year. A more sound decision would be for the Conservatives to stop waiving fees, providing an estimated \$20 million annually in revenue for the program.

It is clear that this new bill speaks to the desires of the gun lobby, but we have to ask ourselves, do we sacrifice the safety of women everywhere for the small inconvenience of filling paperwork once to register a gun and to renew a licence every five years? We have to ask whether the payoff is worth the monumental risk, and the danger Canadian women would face.

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