

Canadian police want to keep gun registry going

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The Conservatives, the party of law and order, appear on a collision course with the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police.

Saskatchewan MP Garry Breitkreuz (Yorkton-Melville), a fervent opponent of the gun registry, has introduced a private member's bill that launches the most sweeping attack on Canadian gun control since its inception.

Bill C-301 not only has the full backing of the Conservative caucus, but also from Prime Minister Stephen Harper. If just 11 opposition MPs support it, it will become the law of the land.

The police chiefs are dead set against it, as are a clear majority of Canadians. A 2001 Gallup poll found that 61 per cent want stricter laws governing the sale of firearms and 63 per cent believe gun ownership should be made illegal for ordinary citizens.

"I urge you and other members of your party not to support (Bill C-301)," CACP president Steven Chabot wrote in a March 9 letter to the prime minister. The police chiefs have been at the forefront calling for gun control since 1973, he noted.

"It is our assessment that Bill C-301 -- by softening controls on machine guns, by allowing the transport of fully automatic and semi-automatic assault weapons to civilian shooting ranges, by ending the registration of long guns such as rifles and shotguns (the weapons most often used in domestic homicides and suicides) and by relaxing the current restrictions on handguns, semi-automatic assault and tactical weapons -- would seriously compromise a system that is working to the betterment of personal, community and police officer safety," Chabot continued.

"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. We oppose Bill C-301 as a retrogressive proposal that cannot, in any way benefit the safety and security of Canadians."

The bill goes far beyond abolishing the long-gun registry. It extends the term of all gun licences to 10 to 12 years, although even dog licences have to be renewed annually. It allows licensed owners to get as many handguns and restricted semi-automatic tactical or military weapons as they want over a period of 10 years without the need to receive approval from the chief firearms officer. It will increase the sale of handguns and restricted firearms such as the Beretta CX4 Storm used in the Dawson College killings and raise the likelihood of their illegal use through theft. Almost 5,000 guns are stolen every year in Canada.

Breitkreuz has promised to take out the sections that have drawn the most criticism, but his critics are skeptical.

Wendy Cukier, co-founder and president of the Coalition for Gun Control, says Bill C-301 basically dismantles gun control in Canada. She notes that the Ruger Mini-14 used by Marc Lepine to kill 14 women at L'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal in 1989 would no longer have to be registered if the bill is passed.

The coalition says there are 450,635 restricted guns (handguns and semi-automatic tactical and military

weapons) in Canada. Legal restricted gun owners have been implicated in many high-profile murders: the 1992 Concordia University shooting, several domestic violence cases, including the 1996 Vernon B.C. massacre, the Dawson College incident and the shooting of John O'Keefe on Toronto's Yonge Street in January 2008.

Breitkreuz defends his bill with the same arguments always used against gun control. "I believe Canadians would rather see their tax dollars keeping guns out of the hands of criminals and gangs instead of trying to control law-abiding citizens."

However, the California attorney general's report on firearms and domestic violence states that "firearms were, by far, the most common weapon used by males to murder females. A woman must consider the risks of having a gun in her home, whether she is in a domestic violence situation or not. Firearms are rarely used to kill criminals or stop crimes. Instead, they are all too often used to inflict harm on the very people they were intended to protect."

According to the RCMP's Canadian firearms program, long guns are the most common type of firearm used in spousal homicide. But gun registration appears to be working. Between 1991 and 2007, the murder rate of women by firearms dropped by 67 per cent, the total murder rate by rifles and shotguns declined by 76 per cent and total firearms death in Canada decreased by 51 per cent. But, Canada still ranks fifth among industrialized countries in the number of children under 14 killed with guns.

Despite the fury over the gun registry's \$2 billion price tag, gun registration now costs just \$2.9 million a year. Police use the registry more than 9,400 times each day.

And the RCMP's Canadian firearms program calls gun registration "a valuable tool for police and Canadians" that ensures greater owner accountability and greater police safety.