

REGISTRY SYSTEM

Gun owners blast firearms bill

Conservatives have 'spit in the face' of core supporters, some gun groups say

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OTTAWA -- Canadian gun owners are expressing outrage toward their traditional Conservative allies, asserting that a recent government bill falls far short of the party's promise to scrap the firearms registry.

Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan recently introduced Bill S-5 in the Senate, describing the legislation as an effort to deliver on the long-standing Conservative pledge.

Opposition MPs and gun-control advocates derided the legislation as an attempt to appease a core element of the party's support base.

But if that was the plan, it appears to have backfired.

Some gun groups say they've been flooded with complaints from members warning the legislation will simply replace a federal registry with a more costly and cumbersome set of provincial registries.

"They have basically spit in the face of one of their largest voting blocks," said Tony Bernardo, executive director of the Canadian Shooting Sports Association. "This is a serious political issue. I'm not entirely sure how serious the Conservatives are taking it, but the issue is very serious for them."

Mr. Bernardo said he is personally aware of "hundreds" of gun owners who have torn up their Conservative Party memberships over the bill.

"This will affect [the Conservatives] not just financially, it will affect them in their volunteers, it will affect them in their party workers and it will affect them in their voting," he said. "For any political party who's perceptive enough to recognize the opportunity, I think there's several hundred thousand votes to pick up quickly."

Mr. Van Loan insists the legislation does repeal the registry and that there is broad support for such a change. He said the legislation is the same as a bill introduced in the previous Parliament that was supported by gun groups.

"There are always folks out there that would like to see more done," Mr. Van Loan said.

The fury described by Mr. Bernardo is reflected in recent postings by gun owners at <http://www.canadiangunnutz.com>. There, anonymous writers are feverishly debating how best to unleash their outrage toward the Conservative government.

A common view expressed on the site is that the government's bill undercuts a separate private member's bill by Conservative MP Garry Breitkreuz, called C-301, which contains more sweeping changes to the registry system.

"Team: I just returned the latest CPC [Conservative Party of Canada] donation envelope, without any \$\$\$, and with the following written across the form in black Sharpie: C-301 - > YES. S-5 - > NO!!!NOT ONE CENT!" writes one anonymous poster on the site who uses the moniker Plinker.

Others on the site recommend getting involved in boards of other political parties to secure the election of a candidate that opposes the firearms registry.

National Firearms Association president Blair Hagen said his members are being urged to write MPs and the Prime Minister to protest against the bill.

"The reaction to S-5 has been wholly negative," Mr. Hagen said.

But not all opponents of the registry feel so strongly.

The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, which recently played host to Prime Minister Stephen Harper at an event, has come out in favour of the government's legislation.

Spokesman Greg Farrant said he understands the concerns of other groups, but believes they can be addressed through amendments when the bill is studied in committee.

"There is some fine-tuning that needs to happen with the bill, but it is a good first step and it is a step the government has been committed to for a long time," he said. "We're glad to see it move forward."