

Tories sniped at firearm data

Challenges held up RCMP report backing long-gun registry until after key Commons vote

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OTTAWA—The release of an annual firearms report last fall was delayed by testy officials in the public safety minister's office who demanded to know, among other things, details about an employee "celebration" of the program's 10th anniversary.

That was just one of a series of questions posed to RCMP officials after the 2008 Commissioner of Firearms Report was delivered to the minister's office for tabling – a full seven weeks before it was released publicly.

Emails obtained by the *Star* show then-public safety minister Peter Van Loan's office sat on the report for weeks until after a contentious parliamentary vote that saw 12 NDP and eight Liberal MPs succumb to political pressure and support ending the long-gun registry.

Afterwards, Van Loan told reporters he had the report in hand for "several days." He went on to accuse firearms staff of inflating numbers in the report to justify the existence of the gun registry.

In fact, the document trail shows the RCMP – as required by law – submitted the report to the minister's office on Sept. 18. The RCMP anticipated it would be released within the usual 15 sitting days.

But it was held until Nov. 6 while Van Loan's staff pored over the statistics within and tried to parse data that showed the firearms registry's use and popularity is on the rise.

"The MO (minister's office) has some questions on the 2008 Firearms Commissioner's Report," public safety official Rachel Huggins wrote to the RCMP, in emails obtained under the Access to Information law.

Among the questions was a query seeking details of a 10th anniversary "celebration" of the Canadian Firearms Program at the central processing site, in Miramichi, N.B.

The answer was a defensive one from bureaucrats keenly aware of the federal Conservatives' vow to kill the gun registry altogether.

The celebration "was an employee-funded and organized initiative," replied RCMP briefing analyst Alison Coe. "Many of the 230 staff at the location devoted themselves to planning and fundraising for the event, which included guest speakers and a dinner.

"Public funds were not used for the dinner, so release of budget details would be at the discretion of the employee group that organized the event."

Unhappy with the contents of the report, ministerial staff asked for further explanations of statistics that showed a rise in police queries to the firearms registry, and greater satisfaction with service provided over the Internet or telephone.

The minister's office demands an explanation for "why the minister has been presented with an inked, bound and printed final draft not long before the document needs to be tabled," and appears to challenge why a report was produced at all, since the minister hadn't issued a direction or instruction on it.

The RCMP says it views the language of the firearms act, which requires a report, to be "permissive, in other words, the minister may or may not decide to give direction."

It says "six (firearms) commissioner's reports have been produced (2003-2008), and have always been initiated by the commissioner without specific direction from the minister with respect to form or content." It says previous reports were always provided to the minister "in final form."

"It has not been the practice in the past to share a draft copy of the report with the minister's office."

The email trail shows the 2008 firearms report was received on Sept. 18, but "apparently reviewed by the office of the liaison to the minister for some time. The minister's office is now saying that because they did not receive the report until Oct. 9, they have until Nov. 6 to table it."

The 2008 report was a largely positive review of the gun control program, and confirmed growing police use of the gun registry database. The 2009 numbers are even more pronounced.