

Study shoots holes in \$2B 'fabrication'

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The \$2-billion figure often cited as the cost of the gun registry is a Saskatchewan MP's "fabrication" that took on a life of its own as Conservative MPs and the media repeated it for years, says a new study.

In late 2002, a report by auditor general Sheila Fraser said the cost of the federal gun registry tallied nearly \$1 billion from 1996-2006.

Her figure became political ammunition in the hands of Saskatchewan backbench MP Garry Breitkreuz, an opponent of gun control who was in the Reform Party, then the Canadian Alliance, and is now a Conservative.

He began calling the gun registry a "\$1-billion boondoggle."

But within four months his language had escalated into "a \$2-billion boondoggle."

The study says Breitkreuz "strategically created" that catch phrase. The study calls it his "fabrication."

Breitkreuz said in an interview Wednesday that at one level, the study's authors are "disingenuous" for "quibbling over \$1 billion or \$2-billion."

Either figure "is horrific. It's wasted money that would have been much better spent going after organized crime and other serious things."

The study's lead author, Peter Malachy Ryan, said there's a current relevance to debunking the \$2-billion figure.

The Conservatives have introduced legislation to scrap the long-gun registry.

"It's relevant to the current debate because if most people think it ran over costs that wildly, it changes its value in people's minds," said Ryan, an instructor at Ryerson University.

"There needs to be the other story that it saves lives, that it saves health-care dollars, that it's a public-safety issue."

Breitkreuz was quoted in a Calgary Herald story in March 2003 explaining the origin of the \$2 billion figure.

He said then he'd added Fraser's \$1 billion figure to another \$1 billion estimated cost of enforcing the legislation.

The latter \$1 billion came from a paper Breitkreuz asked a researcher at the non-partisan Library of Parliament to produce.

The \$1-billion in that paper reflected the potential cost of 500,000 convictions over five years for violating the new firearms legislation.

But it's clearly a hypothetical figure, since the Library of Parliament paper itself shows only a fraction as many firearms offences have occurred.

Wednesday, Breitkreuz said the second \$1 billion did not come from the Library of Parliament study but reflected the "economic cost" of the gun registry.

He said it was based on his own calculations of an estimated \$200 cost for each licensed firearm owner as well as a decline in hunting and tourism that he argued could be blamed on the registry.

In fact, he said, "when you take into account all of that and the loss of revenue to the government, it goes well beyond the \$2 billion."

Once it was in the Herald article, "\$2-billion boondoggle" became the catch phrase "in Parliament and the media, continuing unabated to the present day," said the Ryerson study.

As recently as June 5, Conservative backbench MP Mark Warawa used the \$2 billion figure in tabling a petition opposing the gun registry.

He erroneously referred to the registry as spiraling out of control to "\$2 billion a year," even though neither the auditor general nor Breitkreuz generated a \$1-billion annual cost.

Since the Harper government took office in 2006, 14 different Conservative MPs have used Breitkruz's fictitious \$2-billion figure, says the study, including cabinet ministers. The study found Breitkreuz played an influential and dominant role in debates in all three stages.

His use of the term "boondoggle" gained traction in 2002.

Ryan countered that when both the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police and the Canadian Medical Association "are adamant that it's valuable, it should definitely not be scrapped."

The registry was begun in 1995. In 2006, Fraser's latest look at it concluded the total net cost up to March 2005 was \$946 million.

The old registry in place before C-68 cost \$30 million a year. The current registry costs \$82.3 million a year, according to Treasury Board..