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## NDP controls gun registry's fate

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The Conservatives will call upon the help of a dozen NDP MPs to reform the federal gun registry, as the House of Commons prepares to vote next week on a bill that would wipe hunting firearms from the database.

Opposition members of the public safety committee, including the lone NDP member, Vancouver's Don Davies, voted on Thursday to suspend ongoing hearings on Bill C-391. The private member's bill, sponsored by Conservative MP Candice Hoepfner and supported by the entire Tory caucus, would alter existing legislation so that Canadians with gun licences would no longer have to register their hunting rifles and other non-restricted firearms with the RCMP-administered Canadian Firearms Centre.

Handguns and other restricted firearms would continue to be registered.

If the NDP MPs who previously supported the bill don't change their vote, it will likely become law.

Yesterday, Liberal public safety critic Mark Holland called on NDP leader Jack Layton to persuade his caucus to vote to keep the registry in place.

"It's all about whether Jack Layton can get the support we need to save this registry," Mr. Holland said. "I think he's in huge trouble if he doesn't."

The Bloc Quebecois is expected to vote en masse against the bill. The Liberals were allowed to vote with their conscience at the bill's second reading last fall, and eight Liberals voted in favour of it. Since then, Liberal MPs have been ordered by leader Michael Ignatieff to vote against C-391.

That leaves the NDP to cast the deciding votes. Twelve of the party's 36 MPs voted in favour of Ms. Hoepfner's bill on second reading. Combined with the Conservative vote, that gave the bill a lifeline and pushed it through the committee stage.

The NDP has never outright required MPs to vote along party lines on a private member's bill, and that policy will stand. "Our position hasn't changed. We don't whip with private member's bills," said NDP spokesman Rick Boychuk yesterday.

New Democrat MP Joe Comartin acknowledged there is intense negotiating behind the scenes and said some New Democrats who supported Ms. Hoepfner last November are considering switching sides, because they are coming around to the position that the registry saves lives. However, they are conflicted because some promised their constituents they would vote to eliminate the database, Mr. Comartin said.

Ms. Hoepfner agrees the NDP is the key to her bill's survival. "The only way it won't be killed is if I get some NDP support," she said on Thursday.

Ms. Hoepfner acknowledged she launched the bill as a private member as a tactical measure: It has a better chance of passing because of free votes allowed on private member's bills.

The Liberals contend C-391 is a government bill masquerading as a private member's bill, because Prime Minister Stephen Harper has promised to eliminate the gun registry.

Mr. Comartin said only a couple of New Democrats have shut the door on changing their votes, "because they sincerely believe the gun registry is useless."

Manitoba New Democrat Jim Maloway said yesterday he has opposed the registry through five elections as a provincial or federal candidate.

"I haven't changed my mind on this issue for 15 years, so I don't think 15 days is going to do much one way or the other," said Mr. Maloway, the only NDP opponent available for comment yesterday.