

House eyes Breitkreuz's explosive gun bill Conservatives say Liberal Party 'destroyed itself in rural Canada with the gun registry.'

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By Abbas Rana

Conservatives are being "dishonest" by trying to win support on both sides of the divisive gun control issue by relying on Conservative MP Garry Breitkreuz's private member's bill to end the long-gun registry rather than bringing in a government bill, says Liberal public safety and national security critic Mark Holland.

"They're trying to whisper in one ear to people who have concerns about the need to continue the registry which includes the chiefs of police by the way, 'Don't worry, it's not our bill, this is just a private member's bill,' and then in the other area to gun enthusiasts say that, 'Don't worry, we're really with you, this private member's bill is really ours.' It's very disingenuous," said Mr. Holland (Ajax-Pickering, Ont.) in an interview with The Hill Times.

Mr. Breitkreuz's private member's bill, Bill C-301, was introduced on Feb. 1 and is scheduled for debate on April 1. The Harper government has not introduced any government bill to abolish the gun registry. The government, however, introduced a legislation, C-24 on this issue in the last Parliament and it died on the Order Paper after Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) asked the Governor General to dissolve Parliament in September of last year to call an election. In their election platform, the Conservatives pledged to end the "ineffective long-gun registry and reduce guns in our streets."

In interviews last week, Conservatives said that Canadians want action and won't mind whether the law is passed by Parliament through a private member's bill or a government bill.

"Law-abiding duck hunters, farmers and aboriginals don't care if it's a private member's bill or a government bill, they just want this boondoggle done with," said Conservative MP Pierre Poilievre (Nepean-Carleton, Ont.) who is also Parliamentary secretary to Prime Minister Harper in an interview with The Hill Times.

Mr. Breitkreuz, who gained national recognition for revealing massive cost overruns, or the "billion-dollar-boondoggle," in the gun registry when prime minister Jean Chrétien was in power, said that based on the conversations he's had with opposition MPs, he's hopeful his private member's bill will become law.

"I believe that many private members' bills succeed, yes, I feel that this one has a good possibility of succeeding," he said.

Mr. Breitkreuz declined to give any details about behind-the-scenes conversations with opposition MPs.

There is no date yet for the bill's second reading vote, but it's expected a vote will likely take place either at the end of May or in early June.

Private members' bills rarely become law because of the priority given to government bills.

Meanwhile, pundits and opposition MPs have been critical, accusing the government of using

the issue for political reasons.

"How valuable is the registry to Harper? Precious enough that Tories continue to bash it as symbolic of the Liberal nanny state, but have not abolished it in three years in power. Harper is now leaving its fate to a private member's bill-a process prone to failure," wrote Toronto Star syndicated columnist James Travers in a recent column and published in this week's issue of The Hill Times.

He also said in the same column that if it had been a priority for the Conservatives, they would have killed this registry in their first term. "If Conservatives listened to their own rhetoric-and weren't hunting eastern, swing and urban voters-shooting the gun registry would have been a first-term priority," wrote Mr. Travers.

NDP MP Joe Comartin (Windsor-Tecumseh, Ont.), who is also his party's deputy House leader and justice critic, agreed. "It is a very nice tool to attack the Liberals. If they get rid of it, it would be one less thing that they can attack the Liberals," said Mr. Comartin.

But Mr. Poilievre disagreed. "The Liberal Party destroyed itself in rural Canada with the gun registry. They should listen to rural Canadians who have told them for the last 10 years that targeting duck hunters, farmers and aboriginals is not going to keep anybody safe, it's just a sink hole. We know that people are with us on this issue. Everybody knows that registering hunting rifles in rural Saskatchewan does not stop hand gun crime in downtown Toronto. Let's stop wasting money, let's stop harassing aboriginals, farmers and hunters and let's [start] fighting real crime."

Meanwhile, Mr. Breitkreuz came under criticism recently when The Toronto Star reported that he was scheduled to speak at a controversial gun lobby dinner on April 18 in the GTA where a Beretta handgun was being raffled off. Following the media focus on this story highlighting the problems with guns and crime in the GTA, the Canadian Shooting Sports Association (CSSA) withdrew Mr. Breitkreuz's invitation.

"This wasn't intended to cause him problems and it was starting to cause him problems and we decided to pull our invitation," Tony Bernardo, a spokesman for the association told The Star and added that the raffle would still happen.

Mr. Breitkreuz told The Hill Times that prior to accepting the invitation, he was not aware that a gun was going to be auctioned off at the event. Asked if he would have attended, had he known about the gun raffle, Mr. Breitkreuz declined to answer a hypothetical question.

Prime Minister Harper also attended a meeting of the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters in Mississauga, Ont., where a hunting rifle was auctioned off.

Mr. Holland took a shot at Conservatives for these events. "I don't know if it's a requirement when a Conservative speaks that you have to auction off a weapon."

Mr. Poilievre responded. "For Mr. Holland to attack the millions of farmers, hunters and aboriginals who own rifles demonstrates the worst side of snobbish Liberal elitism."