

Applaud Tory MP, win a Beretta semi-automatic

Gun group's door prize triggers fury at politician

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OTTAWA—A Saskatchewan Conservative MP is coming under fire for his starring role at a gun lobby dinner in the Greater Toronto area next month where the raffle prize is a Beretta semi-automatic handgun.

Garry Breitkreuz is the guest speaker at the Canadian Shooting Sports Association's (CSSA) annual general meeting and dinner on April 18 in Mississauga, where he's to be lauded for his private member's bill to abolish Canada's controversial long-gun registry and relax rules on prohibited and restricted weapons.

The "special dinner draw" of this "very rare and valuable collector's item" is advertised on the association's website. Raffle tickets will be sold at the dinner for \$20 each or three for \$50.

News of the gun prize drew immediate outrage.

"We have got to be finding ways to get (handguns) off the streets, not handing them out as prizes," Liberal MP Mark Holland (Ajax-Pickering) said yesterday.

"It really is an insult to a community that has seen so much gun violence and where so many people have been killed ... to give that away as a (raffle) prize."

The *Toronto Star* could not reach Breitkreuz (Yorkton-Melville) or the CSSA.

The raffle prize is being billed as a special "Canadian Edition" of the Beretta, "the most advanced expression of technological and esthetic feature in a semi-automatic handgun."

The PX4 Storm will be used by the Canada Border Services Agency, but it will not be available to Canadian firearms owners until the Breitkreuz dinner.

A spokesperson for Toronto Mayor David Miller said giving away a handgun is "outrageous, inappropriate and insensitive, frankly, to all the families of victims of gun crime in Toronto and the GTA."

Stuart Green, speaking for the vacationing mayor, said the so-called prize could easily find its way to the streets, as many privately owned handguns do.

"Statistics show that between 30 and 40 per cent of handguns that end up in the hand of criminals are obtained through one-time legal ways and are stolen and sold through the black market," he said.

Green said the federal government should not be a party to an event where a handgun is being raffled off.

The raffle has left others in disbelief, including an official at Montreal's Dawson College, where a gunman carrying a Beretta semi-automatic carbine opened fire on Sept. 13, 2006, killing one student and wounding 13 others.

"As someone who has seen first-hand the wounds – physical and mental – of people who have been victims of gun violence, (a gun giveaway) has no place in my Canada," Donna Varrica, Dawson's director of communications, told the *Star*.

NDP Leader Jack Layton (Toronto-Danforth) said he could not believe that any group would be so "callous" as to give away a handgun in the GTA, which has been plagued with gun problems.

Last year, there were more than 60 gun-related deaths in the GTA. "It's the kind of thing you expect to hear south of the border ... the fact you could pick one up in a raffle prize sends exactly the wrong message," Layton said.

CSSA, which refers to the gun registry as "hated," calls Breitzkreuz as a "voice of reason."

"The (proposed) Breitzkreuz bill will help restore credibility to Canada's firearms controls measures and we strongly encourage all Canadians to support it," CSSA executive director Larry Whitmore stated recently.

The CSSA's website carries the following message: "The disarming of citizens has been a tragic failure. Violent crime has increased everywhere it's been tried as it serves only to embolden the still-armed criminal."

The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, which supports the long-gun registry, said Breitzkreuz's bill, up for second reading vote on April 22, "would seriously compromise" public safety.

The police association warns it relaxes the control on machine guns by allowing the transport of fully automatic and semi-automatic assault weapons to civilian shooting ranges and relaxes the current restrictions on handguns, semi-automatic assault and tactical weapons.

"We are proud of Canada's international reputation as a country with effective gun control legislation, and strenuously oppose any weakening of Canada's current firearms control regime," president Steven Chabot said in a March 9 letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

"All guns are potentially dangerous, all guns owners need to be licensed, all guns need to be registered and gun owners need to be accountable for their firearms."

Chabot described Breitzkreuz's bill as a "retrogressive proposal that cannot, in any way, benefit the safety and security of Canadians."

When it was introduced in 1995, the gun registry was supposed to cost \$2 million but has ballooned to about \$2 billion, giving critics more than enough ammunition to call for the program to be scrapped.

Since coming to power in 2006, the Conservative government has twice introduced one-year amnesties for those who haven't registered their firearms. The latest is in force until May 2009.

Varrica said she fears some opposition party members will join the Conservatives in supporting the private member's bill. "This is exactly the kind of move we have been warning Canadians about since we went public with our opposition to weakening gun laws in the aftermath of the shooting. And today, here it is on our doorstep, just as we predicted," she said.

Varrica noted that since the Dawson shooting on Sept. 13, 2006, there have been 15 school shootings worldwide, including the one last week in Germany, that have left 88 people dead and 56 injured, the majority of these students.