

## Senior Mountie backs gun registry; Toews calls it wasteful

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OTTAWA — The No. 2 Mountie came out in favour of the embattled federal gun registry Thursday -- even as his political boss affirmed the government's desire to abolish it.

Deputy RCMP commissioner Bill Sweeney told the Commons public safety committee the long-gun registry helps both police officers and citizens.

"I believe that there's compelling evidence that the registry promotes officer and public safety," Sweeney said. "That's a personal opinion."

The veteran officer said the RCMP was working with the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police on a position paper on the registry that may soon be presented to a cabinet committee.

Minutes earlier, Public Safety Minister Vic Toews denounced the system for tracking long guns, ushered in by the Liberals, as a waste of money.

"We don't believe it's an effective use of taxpayers' money and we are committed to seeing the abolition of the long-gun registry," he told MPs on the public safety committee.

A Conservative MP's private member's bill to dismantle the long-gun registry has passed second reading and will be studied by a Commons committee.

Since its inception in the 1990s, the registry has been the focus of controversy -- derided by some as a needless intrusion into the lives of law-abiding gun owners and lauded by others as a worthy tool for police who use it daily to glean valuable information.

Toews says the more than \$1 billion spent on the registry would have been better earmarked toward putting police officers on the street.

The minister recounted his years as an opposition MP, listening to the Liberal government tell him how the registry's costs "were spiralling out of control."

"Was that an effective use of money? No," Toews said.

"RCMP officers, in my opinion, have much more important things to do than harass my farmers and my hunters in my constituency when they have .22 rifles and .303s and shotguns that they use almost as tools."

Toews said while the government doesn't back the registry, it supports effective licensing of gun owners. It also plans to continue registration of restricted firearms such as handguns.

A federal official told The Canadian Press the Conservatives plan to announce Friday a one-year extension to an amnesty that effectively gives owners of unregistered, non-restricted firearms more time to sign them up.

Toews said there's a difference of opinion among police on the value of the long-gun registry -- a point Sweeney acknowledged.

Conservative MP Brent Rathgeber suggested that "in an era of finite and sometimes scarce resources," money now devoted to registering guns could be better spent.

"Could those scarce resources not be better deployed to promote what you said in your words, officer safety and public safety?" he asked.

Sweeney stuck to his position that the registry is worth the price.

"There's always opportunities to reinvest money in other ventures, but I believe that that money is well invested."