

Harper appearance adds fuel to raffled guns controversy

By Andrew Mayeda, Canwest News Service
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OTTAWA — Prime Minister Stephen Harper is courting controversy by giving a speech this weekend at a fishing and hunting conference where organizers are auctioning off a hunting rifle.

The prime minister will deliver the keynote address on Saturday evening in Mississauga, Ont., at the annual conference of the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters. The organization is holding a silent auction at the conference for a "hunting package" that includes a rifle.

Harper's appearance comes only days after Conservative MP Garry Breitkreuz faced an uproar over plans to address a dinner where the organizers, the Canadian Shooting Sports Association, will give away a Beretta semi-automatic handgun as a raffle prize.

"Is there going to be a weapon auctioned off at every event they speak at?" said Liberal MP Mark Holland. "The optics are terrible, and when you mix it with everything else the government is doing to undermine gun control, it's disturbing."

Breitkreuz, who has tabled a private member's bill that would scrap the long-gun registry, was scheduled to speak at the shooting sports association's annual conference on April 18. But the association withdrew the invitation this week, saying it didn't want to create problems for the Saskatchewan MP.

A spokesman for Toronto Mayor David Miller called the handgun raffle "inappropriate," given Toronto's recent struggles with gang-related gun crime.

For its part, the Prime Minister's Office said it did not endorse the raffle. But Kory Teneycke, the prime minister's chief spokesman, said Friday there is "clearly a distinction" between raffling off a handgun and a hunting rifle.

"There's a serious problem with gun violence connected to drugs and gangs in some major Canadian cities, but that is really not a problem of people using hunting rifles or shotguns designed for duck hunting," said Teneycke. "There's no issue pertaining to the silent auction, from our perspective."

But New Democrat MP Joe Comartin said the government shouldn't be throwing its weight behind such events, no matter what kind of gun is involved. According to the

Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, which opposes Breitzkreuz's bill, most domestic murders and suicides are committed with long guns.

"The reality is that we need fewer guns in this country, and anything that facilitates another gun going into circulation is something that should be avoided," said Comartin, adding that the prime minister should be focusing on economic matters as the country struggles through recession.

Lezlie Goodwin, an Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters spokeswoman, did not know the exact model of the rifle to be auctioned, but said it will be a non-restricted long gun. Anyone who bids must have a firearm licence, and the proceeds will go toward fish and wildlife conservation, she added.

"I don't understand the controversy," said Goodwin. "We absolutely share the concern that illegal firearms and crime should be dealt with. We make the distinction, though, between law-abiding hunters and criminals who are illegally acquiring weapons."

Under Canada's current firearms law, owners must register all firearms, including those classified as non-restricted long guns. The Conservatives have twice tried to scrap the long-gun registry through government legislation, but the bills never passed.

The police association has argued that Breitzkreuz's bill would have loosened Canada's gun-control regime by allowing the transport of automatic and semi-automatic assault weapons to shooting ranges.

But in the wake of the raffle controversy, Breitzkreuz says he will withdraw those portions of the bill not related to the long-gun registry.

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