

Ottawa extends long-gun amnesty for another year

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WINNIPEG — The federal government has once again extended its amnesty for long-gun owners who haven't registered their firearms.

Treasury Board President Vic Toews says it's still the government's intention to kill the registry for long-gun owners — something opposition parties would have to agree to in the minority Parliament.

But for now the government is giving people another year to sign up their unregistered, non-restricted firearms. It's also waiving fees for licence renewals and upgrades for another year.

"We are preventing the pointless criminalization of non-restricted gun owners, who are working to come into compliance with our firearms laws," Mr. Toews said in a statement.

"Make no mistake. This amnesty actually serves to enhance public safety. When previously extended, the amnesty encouraged an increase of gun owners registering as licensed firearms owners, as did the other measures we are renewing today."

The amnesty was first introduced in 2006 and was extended in 2008.

Mr. Toews calls the registry a waste of money that penalizes law-abiding citizens, but its supporters say it helps police crack down on crime.

"Our effort to combat criminal gun crimes remains strong," said the minister.

"We have introduced mandatory prison sentences for those who commit gun crimes and tougher bail rules for serious weapon-related offences."

Efforts by the minority Conservative government to kill the long-gun registry appear to be stalled.

Despite introducing an unusual Senate bill to great fanfare, officials have acknowledged there's no timetable for a vote on Bill S-5 in the Liberal-dominated upper chamber.

Liberals have claimed the whole point of the exercise was political posturing rather than serious legislative change.

The Canadian Police Association, representing front-line police officers, has said the bill will compromise public safety.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff has said Liberals will not support either bill, which virtually guarantees they'll never be enacted.

Tories have long contended that the registry is a waste of taxpayers' money and does nothing to combat crime.

But in a recent letter to Mr. Ignatieff, police association president Charles Momy said officers used the registry an average of 9,400 times a day last year. Among other things, he said, the registry is helpful in alerting officers to the likely presence of guns when responding to domestic violence calls or other volatile situations.

He says the registry also "discourages casual gun ownership," prompting people to get rid of unused or unwanted firearms. And it encourages those who do own guns to abide by safe storage laws and report thefts.

Critics of the registry have characterized it as penalizing law-abiding long-gun owners, primarily hunters and rural residents.

But Mr. Momy noted that of 15 police officers fatally shot in Canada during the last decade, 13 were killed with rifles or shotguns. Moreover, he said, long guns are used two times more frequently than handguns in spousal homicides and five times more in suicides.

Being able to identify ownership of firearms can be crucial in investigating and prosecuting suspects, he said.

For instance, Mr. Momy said a registered rifle found at the scene of the 2005 murder of four RCMP officers in Mayerthorpe, Alta., was part of the evidence that ultimately led to the arrest and conviction of two men for manslaughter.