

Police chief insulted by ‘false accusation’ by Tory MP

Liberals demand Tory MP apologize for “smearing” Bill Blair

2010/05/28 18:10:00

Tonda MacCharles Ottawa Bureau with files from Susan Delacourt
Toronto Star

OTTAWA—Toronto police Chief Bill Blair says he was insulted and “disappointed” after a Tory MP suggested he and other Canadian police chiefs were gagging critics of the long-gun registry.

Conservative MP Shelley Glover (Saint Boniface) told a parliamentary committee hearing this week that police critics of the long-gun registry have been “silenced.”

Glover, a Winnipeg patrol officer on leave since she was elected in 2008, declared she was among frontline officers who were “polled” when the registry was first created by a Liberal government in the mid 1990s, and “overwhelmingly” expressed opposition to it, just as officers today oppose it, she claims.

“There were officers who did suffer consequences at the hands of chiefs, like Mr. Blair, who did transfer them out when they spoke out against it. That is why they are silenced today and are afraid to come forward,” said Glover.

“I’ve received thousands of phone calls from people in Toronto, from people in Montreal, from across this country, police officers who are afraid to stand up because they fear consequences in their job. I’m ashamed of that. I’m ashamed as a police officer. I’m ashamed as an elected official.”

The comments signal a remarkable rift between the law-and-order Tories and Blair, one of the country’s top cops.

On Friday, Liberals demanded Glover apologize, and Blair said he was taken aback and “quite disappointed” by the venom of the attacks after he appeared to testify in support of the long-gun registry as head of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police. He was in the room at the time of Glover’s remarks “but I had no opportunity to respond,” he said.

“Quite frankly, I interpreted it as an accusation, a false accusation of course, because it’s never happened, but the suggestion that there was some vast number of police officers that I had somehow suppressed from expressing themselves is simply not true,” Blair told the *Star*.

“Overwhelmingly, my colleagues hold the view that the firearms registry needs to be retained.

“I was disappointed by the very disrespectful tone, even bordering on contempt, in which some of the comments were made and questions were asked.”

Blair took particular offence to Glover’s suggestion that “I and other of my colleagues have engaged in misconduct — a completely baseless allegation . . . I have been before parliamentary committees in the past and I have always been treated with respect.

“I would hope that all parliamentarians would value the experience and the input of police officers, police chiefs, police unions, police boards who are remarkably united in their support of retaining this information.”

Blair said a Saskatoon officer did appear this week to testify against the registry — as an individual who belongs to a gun club — with the full knowledge of his chief, Clive Weighill, who nevertheless sent a letter of support to Blair on behalf of the Saskatoon force. No Toronto officer has indicated to Blair an interest in testifying against the registry, said the Toronto chief, adding he would allow it as long as they were expressing an individual opinion — “I wouldn’t authorize them to speak on behalf of the Toronto police service. I’m the chief of police. I do that.”

One female officer from Toronto’s guns and gangs unit has testified in support of the registry, although Blair was unaware of her appearance at the time.

Blair differed with Glover’s claim that “thousands” of police officers across the country oppose the gun registry, saying past differences of opinion between police associations — representing rank-and-file officers — and the associations representing chiefs of police have been “grossly misrepresented by the gun lobby.”

While there were “inefficiencies” when the long-gun registry was first created, he said the 2006 move by the Conservatives to hand over its operation to the RCMP was “the right decision” and has changed many people’s views.

“It’s now very efficiently run. They operate the entire long-gun registry for about \$4 million a year. The quality of information, reports and the timeliness of those reports available to law enforcement has improved very significantly.”

Blair dismissed retired officers who have told the committee most cops want to kill the registry, saying the “gun lobby” often “goes to the local gun club and recruit a couple of cops who’ve retired and who pretend to speak on behalf of law enforcement.”

“Who does she think she is?” Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff told the *Star*, demanding that Glover apologize for her “completely unacceptable” comments during a “legitimate debate about gun control.”

Glover’s attack is typical of “a party and a government which are masters of intimidation,” said Ignatieff.

“When the Conservatives are faced with someone who disagrees with them, they don’t just refute their arguments, they attempt to slander people. And this is a slander on Bill Blair.”

Glover denied she was referring to Blair, but rather to “chiefs like Bill Blair.” She said she had no evidence Blair had acted to transfer or silence any critics.

But she claims she has been contacted by three Canadian police officers — whom she refused to identify by name, force or region — who want to testify in support of the bill to kill the registry, “and their chiefs wouldn’t let them.”

“There are more, but those three specific ones were in fact told that they couldn’t come.”