

Montreal Massacre reminds us why we need gun registry

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By Heather Mallick, special to [CBC News](#)

Next Sunday marks the 20th anniversary of the Montreal Massacre, a day that will live forever in hurt. On Dec. 6, 1989, a terrible and damaged man walked into a class at École Polytechnique with a .223-calibre rifle, ordered the men out of the room and began a march through the building that left 14 women dead and another 10 women and four men injured.

I could here a tale unfold to harrow up your soul and freeze your blood. Instead, I will direct you to the CBC.ca's [immaculate archive](#) of news about that hideous day and its aftermath. It's painful to watch, but it's worthwhile for parents. For me, it's a sad irony because in those two decades, the young women in my family grew up, went to university and entered a work world that is still a gauntlet of knives for women. My girls did everything that would have been done by the hopeful women murdered by Marc Lépine. (I worry that the parents of the dead will read this, and that sentence will hurt them. I apologize.)

Lépine used a [Ruger Mini-14](#), the kind of gun normally used by hunters to kill gophers, groundhogs and rabbits. It's a comfortable gun, lightweight with little recoil, and it's semi-automatic, which means it fires without complications every time you pull the trigger (especially effective with a larger magazine of 20 bullets). It's very accurate to begin with, but in a classroom, experts say, you couldn't miss if you tried. And Lépine, a hater of all women, especially police officers and prominent successful women, did not. After the Montreal Massacre, the federal government set up a gun registry. I have just re-read Dave Cullen's recent book, *Columbine*, and when I read about how the U.S. has repeatedly made guns even easier to buy after that 1999 school shooting and the more than 80 in the United States since then, I feel proud of Canada.

The registry requires only this: If you buy or own a gun — and this includes rifles used by farmers and hunters, firing range enthusiasts, etc. — it must be registered. It won't be confiscated, but law enforcement officials will know you have it. Is this so damaging to one's own personal notion of one's manhood?

There's no reason to be ashamed of owning a rifle if you live rurally and make rural excursions, and no reason to object to registering your gun the same way you register your car, house, boat, dog and cat. You often register major purchases in case they turn out to be faulty. The city inspects your house to make sure it's reliably built, your life insurer knows your health status, your home insurer prowls around, and doctors regularly probe your cavities and press your tender areas for signs of cancer.

Yes, Canada does its best to keep the country safe and organized. So this anniversary is an odd time for a small but loud rural minority to try to kill the long-gun portion of the registry. They may get their way, and that will be Canada's means of marking 20 years since the killings.

May save a police officer's life

The Conservatives hate the registry. But hate is a feeling. Here are the facts. The [RCMP website](#) states that there are 7.5 million licensed guns in Canada. Police agencies find the registry extremely useful, given that any time an officer goes out on a call, she or he is hypothetically in danger. In 2009, police made an average 10,800 calls a day to find out registry information.

As Canadians, we have both rights and responsibilities. Isn't it a decent citizen's responsibility to make a paperwork concession that may help save the life of a police officer or an abused wife? It's the least our country asks of us.

As Stephen Hume [wrote this month](#) in the Vancouver Sun, the loud, endlessly complaining rural minority doesn't understand the facts about gun deaths.

"Studies in both the U.S. and Canada in fact show that rates of domestic violence are comparable in urban and rural settings," he writes. "Statistics show clearly that women are more likely to be murdered with a long gun than with a handgun. So much for the myth of the big, bad city and the moral superiority of a tranquil country life."

Here's another sad stat: 74 per cent of firearms recovered from suicides and suicide attempts from 1974 to 1997 were unrestricted rifles and shotguns (the easiest-to-possess category of the three categories of firearms, although all require registration). One of the reasons men commit suicide more than women is that they prefer guns, which will kill you flat out. Women do chancier things; pills don't always work. I don't want depressed people to have an easy means of suicide at hand, and this is one of the conditions that the gun registry questionnaire is designed to reveal.

If Stephen Harper gets his majority government, he will certainly be honest enough — which he isn't now — to tell you that Canadian life will change radically. The gun registry is as fragile as abortion rights. The fight over registering long guns has always seemed to me to be a symptom of status anxiety: older rural men feeling they don't rate in Canada, and so they will make the city folk and the Easterners cave. Of course you rate! We are all Canadians. It's a symptom of a fractured Canada and a failure of the once-centralized government that held us together in all our disagreements.

'That I am a woman'

And we return to the women in the classroom on that terrible day.

"Fragile." This is how Nathalie Provost, shot by Lépine, described herself to the CBC's Francine Pelletier five years after the bloodbath. She was working as an engineer outside Montreal.

"What did you learn?" Pelletier asked.

"That I am a woman. I cannot ignore that fact. I realize that I am fragile. I always thought that I was tough. After, I realized that I was very fragile, emotionally, physically, even psychologically."

A lot of women feel this way now, as the recession grabs us like a python and squeezes. But so do a lot of men. Couldn't we look out for each other and find some common ground in the fight for the common good? Could gun-owners fill out a simple form with a good heart?

Here's a spur: Think of those 14 women in their cold graves and the 20 years we've had that they didn't.