

Day sticks to his guns on registry changes
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JIM BROWN
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OTTAWA — Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day says he still wants to abolish the federal long-gun registry because it's inefficient and costs too much to operate.

But he couldn't tell a parliamentary committee Thursday exactly how much money the Conservative government hopes to save by killing the program.

The RCMP, which administers the registry, was also hesitant to come to a bottom line.

There are rough estimates, however, that the savings could be less than \$3 million a year — leading Day's critics to charge that he's motivated by politics rather than concern for the taxpayer.

"I don't disagree that there were (cost) problems in the past," said Liberal MP Mark Holland.

"The reality is that the program is working today. . . . Why this unceasing push to kill the program? Is it ideologically driven?"

The Conservatives promised in the last election to scrap the registry, long considered an irritant by shooting enthusiasts.

Day now frames the promise differently — insisting that abolition of registration for some weapons, such as hunting rifles and shotguns, doesn't mean abandoning the whole idea of gun control.

"We need to stop using the phrase 'scrapping the program'," he said Thursday.

"We're making the gun registration system even stronger. One of the things that we are doing to make it stronger is not requiring farmers, duck hunters and others with unrestricted firearms to go through the impossible process, at a cost of millions of dollars, of registering those."

Under the Tory plan, handguns, assault-style rifles and other so-called restricted firearms would still have to be registered. But trying to do the same for every shotgun and low-powered rifle has led to "grotesque waste and inefficiency," said Day.

A better approach, he said, is to focus on dangerous people rather than law-abiding owners and impose longer jail terms for gun-related crimes.

The comments came a day after the minister offered to meet with Hayder Kadhim, a Dawson College student lobbying for tougher gun laws in the wake of the shootings at the Montreal school earlier this year.

Kadhim, who was wounded in the rampage, has challenged Prime Minister Stephen Harper to "explain to me why he wants to dismantle a gun registry proven to have saved many lives which now costs next to nothing to maintain."

Auditor General Sheila Fraser estimated the long-gun registry cost taxpayers just under \$1 billion in its first decade of operation. Since then, however, administrative reforms have drastically cut the bill.

The government originally set aside \$83.6 million for gun-control measures of all kinds in the current fiscal year.

That estimate has been revised to \$70 million, thanks to cost-saving steps at the RCMP.

The operating budget for gun registration alone — including handguns and other restricted firearms as well as long guns — is \$14.6 million for the year.

The Mounties say they can't yet be precise on how much would be saved by abolishing the requirement to register shotguns and hunting rifles.

But Deputy Commissioner Peter Martin said about 20 per cent of current registration work is devoted to long guns. Twenty per cent of \$14.6 million would be \$2.9 million a year.

Martin cautioned, however, that the savings could be a bit less than that because of the operational complexities of the system.

For example, the same computer terminals now used to register long guns would still be needed for other purposes, although they could be used less frequently.

"It's not a simple arithmetic process to come up with the savings," said Martin. "We have to go through and analyze that."

The government introduced legislation in June to abolish the long-gun registry, but has done nothing since to push it through the Commons — perhaps out of fear that it doesn't have the votes to pass.

The Liberals and NDP are split on the issue but a healthy majority of both are believed to oppose abolition. The Bloc Quebecois is solidly against the move.

Day refused to say Thursday when the bill might come up for debate, or to speculate on its chances of passing.