

Web-exclusive commentary

We lose the gun registry at our peril



Why police chiefs strongly oppose Bill C-391

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The House of Commons will vote today on Bill C-391, which is intended to eliminate the need to register rifles and shotguns. This private member's bill will require the destruction of more than 8,000,000 firearms records. The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police strongly opposes it.

The chiefs believe the elimination of Canada's national firearms licensing and registration system for rifles and shotguns will make Canada less safe. We believe it will compromise law-enforcement agencies' ability to deal with gun violence. We believe law enforcement will lose access to information that helps our officers and communities.

This is not a recent position for us. The CACP first called on the federal government to licence gun owners and register firearms in 1990, and never wavered in support of the National Firearms Registry. We helped defend the legislation all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada.

Since 1991, police chiefs have passed resolutions, advocated publicly, testified at parliamentary committees and intervened in court challenges in the interests of creating and maintaining a system to screen and license owners, and register their firearms.

The registry is vitally important for police all across this country. As of June 30, the average daily rate of Canadian police queries to the Canadian Firearms Registry Online is 10,304, covering the entire spectrum of policing.

Some of the most important queries are about domestic violence calls, which every police service in Canada receives. The registry allows us to check for the presence of household firearms – a vital piece of information for protecting victims, as well as the responding officers.

This is not a regional issue. It is not an issue between big cities and small towns. It is not about hunters and sportsmen, collectors and enthusiasts. It is not about politics.

It is about public safety. It is about giving police the information to deal with the danger posed by a firearm in the wrong hands. It is about responsible gun ownership. Consider the following words from Canadian police officials:

Former Cape Breton Regional Police chief Edgar McLeod: "We cannot combat the misuse of guns without strong controls. We recently had a case where an individual made threats to staff at the Children's Aid. Because of the system, we knew he had firearms and were able to obtain a warrant to seize them."

RCMP assistant commissioner Ian Atkins: "We operate in a wide range of environments where long guns are the major problem. We need the tools for preventive action. We are actively combatting the illegal gun trade and cross-border smuggling. Illegal guns begin as legal guns. Without strong controls on legal firearms, we cannot prevent diversion to illegal markets. Without information about who owns firearms legally, and the firearms they own, we cannot charge individuals with illegal possession. We need strong laws controlling firearms."

Chief Frank Beazley of the Halifax Regional Police: "There is no question the system is a valuable tool. We have problems with rifles and shotguns as well as handguns. We need rigorous controls for both. Gun theft is a significant problem. We need to ensure owners are accountable for their firearms. Every gun tells a story and the registration system often gives us a starting point in our investigations."

It's unfortunate that the overwhelming public safety argument in favour of the registry is sometimes obscured by issues of cost overruns and budgetary inefficiencies. Any financial laxity is unacceptable, and there can be no question that the registry has cost far more than it should. While we must always ensure public money is spent prudently, we should not be diverted from the most important points: The registry has made Canada a safer country. The registry has saved lives.

We lose it at our peril.

Toronto Police Chief William Blair is president of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police.