

Canada's competing views on guns

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Different reactions. Divergent visions of a country.

Wednesday's vote in the House of Commons to abolish the long-gun registry reinforced the divide between rural Canada and its metropolitan centres.

While it was a good news day for hunters in small communities like Tarbutt Township, population 450, in Montreal there was dismay.

"For city people, this registry is important, it's a relevant tool to fight crime," said Pierreson Vaval, director of a Montreal outreach group that deals with street gangs.

Mr. Vaval works in the city's north end, in a neighbourhood long plagued by gang problems. Illicit weapons there include shotguns and can be stolen from private homes, he said.

"There's not much hunting in Montreal. ... If someone is going around with a gun in Montreal, he's hunting another type of animal," Mr. Vaval said.

In Tarbutt Township, Ont., 40 kilometres east of Sault Ste. Marie, town councillor Dale Harten was jubilant.

"The Conservative government did the right thing. The people I hunt with, they figured we didn't need it," said Mr. Harten, who hunts ducks, geese and moose.

It was a similar cleaving that had split the Liberal caucus in 1995 when the legislation creating the registry was proposed.

Nine rural Liberal backbenchers voted against the registry, while three Reform MPs from Edmonton and Vancouver voted yes. (Prime Minister Stephen Harper, then a Calgary MP for the Reform Party, voted in favour on second reading of the bill before later reversing his stand.)

This week's parliamentary vote disheartened Heidi Rathjen and Suzanne Laplante-Edwards, two women who were deeply affected by the 1989 École Polytechnique massacre and spent years promoting gun control.

Ms. Rathjen, who was a student at the school on the day of the shooting, is now an anti-tobacco activist but she remained emotionally tied to the fate of the registry.

She was furious at the failure of the NDP and Liberal leaders to prevent their rural MPs from breaking ranks.

"We know who the Conservative party is when it comes to gun control ... Jack Layton, he talks about defending victims, about defending women. And yet what good is all that talk if he can't get his party together? Same thing with Michael Ignatieff."

The rural NDP and Liberal MPs should have bucked the Conservative radio and mailing campaign targeting them, she said.

"That's all the more reason to resist that. This is special interest, it's not what's right for Canada."

Ms. Laplante-Edwards, whose daughter Anne-Marie was one of the 14 women killed at Polytechnique, made it a life mission afterward to change the country's gun laws.

She was able, through persistence, to talk to politicians one by one and sway them. But she recalled being greeted with mockery and insults when she met gun-owner groups.

"There is no way I am going to let this get me down," Ms. Laplante-Edwards said. "The day I am on my deathbed I can say I've done something for the betterment of the Canadian people."