

# An appalling betrayal

By Susan Riley, The Ottawa Citizen November 6, 2009

What a bitter spectacle: MPs from all parties, except the Bloc Québécois, caving to a decades-long campaign by disgruntled gun owners, to U.S.-inspired attack advertising in targeted ridings and to self-interest to issue a death warrant to the long-gun registry.

The symbolism could hardly be more poignant -- well, yes, it could be. Our parliamentarians missed the 20th anniversary of the Montreal massacre, which inspired the creation of the registry, by a month.

It is difficult to say who behaved most cynically. New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton, a founder of the venerable White Ribbon campaign to end violence against women, stood by mutely while 12 of his 36 MPs voted with the Conservatives to kill the registry.

It was a free vote, true, but he could at least have expressed strong disappointment, or disapproval. Instead, he offered this craven excuse: "Some of our members voted in favour to send the bill to committee."

No they didn't. His rural MPs voted to save their sorry seats; they capitulated to a well-orchestrated disinformation effort, rather than fighting back with reasoned argument and proposed improvements to the existing registry -- rather, that is, than appealing to values, values they conveniently ditched to save their skins.

This is reminiscent of the ferocious NDP campaign against a carbon tax, another example of shifting ethics from a party that once bravely opposed the War Measures Act -- a wildly unpopular move at the time that has subsequently been vindicated.

As for Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, his clumsy effort to straddle the fence on every issue is becoming laughable. Rather than mounting an unambiguous defence of the registry, as he did in an April speech in Toronto, he is musing now about "finding a way to rebuild legitimacy for the gun registry in rural Canada." But this is not a new debate -- why has he taken so long to produce ideas on this, or anything else?

Ignatieff also talked about "decriminalization" -- substituting fines for criminal penalties for those who fail to register their firearms. It is worth recalling that this approach was rejected by Liberals in 1995, on the reasonable grounds that it could render the registry optional -- and, therefore, ineffective.

The Conservatives, at least, have been consistent; they have always hated the gun registry. But they have overstated the costs and the consequences, ignored or held back evidence that police forces find it useful -- including Thursday's disputed RCMP report -- and resorted to indirect tactics to kill it.

When it was clear a government law banishing the registry wouldn't pass the minority Parliament, Manitoba Conservative MP Candice Hoepfner advanced her private members' bill, which means a free vote. With the help of those negative ads, the Tories were able to frighten enough opposition MPs aside to win.

Lost in the heated, divisive politicking is the truth about the registry. While horrendously over budget to start, it now costs a tolerable \$8.5 million a year. While it is only one tool in the anti-gun-crime arsenal, police find it increasingly useful according to the RCMP study.

While the registry proved to be frustrating for law-abiding gun owners, particularly in the beginning, to portray it as an attack on individual freedoms, as many Conservatives do, just sounds overwrought -- and derivative.

Dismissed, also, are the victims -- relatives of the women killed at the École Polytechnique, modern-day parents like Elaine Lumley, whose son was shot dead crossing a street in Montreal in 2007. Lumley was on the Hill this week, shocked and stricken by the vote -- but she couldn't get a hearing, perhaps because she doesn't fall into the Tories' approved victim category.

Meanwhile, there is crass calculation in putting forward a 45-year-old female Conservative MP, a mother, to administer the death blow. Hoepfner insists she empathizes with other mothers worried about crime -- but that the real solution is more police officers and stricter control on handguns smuggled across the U.S. border. We have been hearing these promises for years, with little to show for them.

The only chance of saving the registry now may be the Senate. Liberal Senate leader Sharon Carstairs says if the bill reaches the Upper Chamber in its present form (a good bet), it is "in for a rough ride." Liberals retain their majority there for several weeks, and, with a handful of independents, they could delay, or even defeat, the bill.

That would be unusual, but not unprecedented. Some years ago, the Senate defeated a controversial abortion bill -- another issue where fear trumps common sense and elected politicians run for cover.

If they were more concerned with fighting crime than scoring ideological victories, our MPs would find a way to fix the registry, not ditch it.

Instead, this week's reversal is a symbolic and emotional blow to victims of gun crime -- and a disgrace to their skittish supporters.