

MPs are way off target

The Long-gun registration has made Canada a safer place in the past 14 years - Parliament is wrong to kill it

By JANET BAGNALL, The Gazette November 6, 2009

Canada's long-gun registry was a product of tragedy, a response to the massacre of 14 young women at Montreal's École Polytechnique on Dec. 6, 1989.

A registry was a rational step toward trying to make sure that the country would never again experience mass murder. The Polytechnique killer, Marc Lépine, used a semi-automatic gun that allowed him to shoot 28 people in 22 minutes.

Few Canadians in 1989 knew it was considered normal for someone to have unrestricted access to such a gun.

The registry that came into effect in 1995 fell short of a true memorial to the murdered women. A genuinely commemorative law would have restricted ownership of the Sturm-Ruger Mini 14 that was used to kill them. But it was an unrestricted hunting rifle before Dec. 6, 1989 and it remains unrestricted to this day.

That omission pales, however, beside the now likely prospect that the registry itself will be killed outright, making the question of omissions moot. On Wednesday, a majority of MPs voted to give approval in principle to a private member's bill that, if passed, would see the repeal of legal requirements to register long-barrelled rifles and shotguns.

This is a case of third time lucky for the Conservatives. Once as a party and twice through individual members' bills, they have waged a relentless attack on the registry. Critics see this as the politics of division at work, pitting rural voters against urban.

Supporters of the kill-the-registry effort see it more as common sense, a welcome attempt to rid the country of cumbersome, expensive and unnecessary record-keeping.

Of the three complaints - the aggravation, the needlessness and the expense - only cost is a legitimate grievance.

The "intrusiveness" of the registry requirements is less an invasion of privacy, frankly, than having to declare personal income.

Setting up a national long-gun registry did turn out to be a lot more expensive than the original \$2-million estimate.

Auditor-General Sheila Fraser reported in 2006 that the Liberal government had gone to great lengths to hide the real cost of the gun registry, which by 2006 had climbed to just under \$1 billion. (In the same report, however, Fraser brought up the staggering \$18 billion in uncollected, undisputed back taxes that the Canada Revenue Agency couldn't figure how to collect, which should put the cost of the registry in perspective.)

The question of need deserves a serious response, one that has not been forthcoming from the Conservatives. Bizarrely for a law-and-order party, they dismissed out of hand the concerns of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police.

Public safety is at stake, pleaded association president William Blair last month, to no effect. Montreal police Chief Yvan Delorme waded in again this week, saying the registry proved its value after the 2007 shooting at Dawson College. Told of threats made by another individual, police found out from the registry that this person owned several weapons and they were able to confiscate them.

Is public safety at stake? Research is clear: Guns of all kinds fuel violence.

In 1995, when Canada's gun-control law received Senate approval, 911 Canadians killed themselves with a firearm, 145 were murdered with a firearm, 49 died accidentally as a result of being shot, six were shot to death in legal interventions. The circumstances of the shooting deaths of another 14 people were not clear.

The rate of death by a firearm among Canadians under the age of 15 is fifth highest in the world, after the U.S., Finland, Northern Ireland and Israel.

By 2006, the year the Conservatives brought in legislation to abolish the long-gun registry, Canada's firearm homicide rate had dropped by 40 per cent since 1991. The homicide rate without guns decreased by only 28 per cent.

Long guns are the most common type of firearm used in spousal homicide, according to the RCMP. With restrictions in place against them, the number of women murdered with firearms dropped by 62 per cent between 1991 and 2004.

If MP Candice Hoepfner's bill successfully navigates examination by a Commons committee, a third Commons vote and then Senate approval, nearly 8 million firearms records will be destroyed. When police answer a domestic violence call, they won't know whether they are about to enter a house where there are firearms.

Who is made safer by dismantling the registry? Not the people trapped by domestic violence and not the people we depend on to protect us. Their safety should have been enough to sink Hoepfner's bill.