

Rural overrepresentation defeats the people's will

The gun registry is popular with Canadians - about two thirds of them want it retained - so why was it defeated in the House?

John Ibbitson

Globe and Mail, Published on Friday, Nov. 06, 2009 12:00AM EST

If the House of Commons reflected the will of the people, the gun registry would not once again be threatened with the axe.

The long-gun portion of the firearms registry may be ineffective, as Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan maintained yesterday, because police forces rarely use it, concentrating instead on handguns.

Mr. Van Loan was commenting on the Commons vote Wednesday night that approved in principle a private members bill to shut down the registry. He will be belatedly releasing a report today in support of the registry. His government ignored the report. The minister also ignored the truth that police forces insist they value the registry.

But all that is beside the political point. The political point is that the registry is popular with Canadians. About two thirds of them want the registry retained, according to a 2006 Ipsos Reid poll. More recent data doesn't appear to be available, but pollster Darrell Bricker says it is unlikely attitudes have changed since then.

Within that poll are stark contrasts. Urban voters support the registry, and any other measure that limits gun violence. Rural voters oppose the registry, seeing in it an insidious government conspiracy to pry rifles and shotguns out of hunters' and farmers' infuriated hands.

Eighty per cent of us live in cities. If the House of Commons were representative of the nation, the gun registry would survive; the voters of greater Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver would insist on it.

The House of Commons, however, is skewed: by laws and conventions that ensure smaller provinces and Quebec have certain minimum levels of representation in the House.

Within each province, electoral commissions are authorized to adjust riding boundaries in favour of rural voters, on the grounds that otherwise those ridings would become impossibly large.

That is, however, the whole point. Rural ridings would be impossibly large because so few people live in rural parts of the country. Rural overrepresentation in the House distorts policy and confounds the people's will.

The Conservatives love to force votes on the registry because it reveals the splits in the other parties on the issue. A number of Liberal and NDP MPs bolted to the Tories on Wednesday night's vote. Those MPs fear their constituents' wrath if they support the registry, and fear even more the Tory attack ads that would target them in consequence.

So Charlie Angus of Timmins-James Bay, Ontario (NDP); Wayne Easter of Malpeque, PEI (Liberal); Niki Ashton of Churchill, Manitoba (NDP); Scott Andrews of Avalon, Newfoundland and Labrador (Liberal) - 21 opposition MPs in all, from rural or partly rural ridings, voted to shut the registry down, helping the bill to pass second reading comfortably.

The Conservatives are considering adding 30 or more seats to the House of Commons, to address the rural/urban and regional skew. Most of those seats would be in the fast-growing communities on the edges of Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton, where the Tories think they can take on the Liberals and win.

For that reason, Prime Minister Stephen Harper must know that, in the long run, it does his party's future prospects no service to obsess on the registry.

The new, exurban Canadians who live where these new ridings would be formed don't hunt, don't like guns and don't care about Canada's settler heritage.

But having disappointed its core supporters in so many other areas - where are the new tax cuts; where is God in the agenda? - this is one bone that this former Reformer simply must toss at his restive base.

The registry may yet stagger on. The bill must make it through committee and third reading.

Then it heads to the Senate where gun-control advocates will push hard for delay.

Unless the government survives into next fall, the legislation will probably die on the order paper when Parliament dissolves.

Canada's destiny is ever-more urban. If the registry can survive enough minority governments, even the Conservatives might eventually leave it alone.