

COALITION

for Gun Control / pour le contrôle des armes

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Twenty Years after the Montreal Massacre: Gun Control is in Jeopardy

On December 6, 1989, a gunman entered an engineering school, separated the men from the women and shot and killed 14 women, and injured a further 13 people in 22 minutes at Montréal's École Polytechnique. The senseless deaths triggered the Canadian movement toward stronger gun control by the families of the Polytechnique victims, policing, domestic violence and public health experts, victim advocates and thousands of individuals. In 1991, Bill C-17 improved screening, banned some military weapons and strengthened storage requirements. In 1995, Bill C-68, required all gun owners to be licensed, all guns to be registered, banned additional assault weapons as well as some handguns. Public health experts heralded the law in the effort to reduce suicide and injury. Police welcomed it as a crime fighting tool.

All guns are lethal and any gun in the wrong hands is dangerous. A substantial proportion of guns recovered in crime in Canada are rifles and shotguns and they are the guns most often used in domestic violence, murders of police officers and suicides, particularly involving youth. All gun owners should be licensed and all guns should be registered.

Suzanne Laplante-Edward, whose daughter Anne-Marie died that day, has called the law a monument to the memory of the victims. But it is much more than a symbol. There is evidence that Canada's gun control law and the registry is working, for example:

- There has been a substantial decline in firearm death and injury; three hundred fewer people die from gunshots annually than in 1995.
- Murders with rifles and shotguns, including spousal homicides, have decreased dramatically.
- A recent Statistics Canada study on Family Violence indicated that spousal murders with guns have fallen by two thirds since the law passed while spousal murders without guns have remained the same.

But, 20 years after the Montreal Massacre, gun control is in Jeopardy. Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party have vowed to repeal the registration of rifles and shotguns. After several unsuccessful attempts, Private Member's Bill C-391 passed second reading in the House of Commons on November 4, 2009. Bill C-391 is a government bill packaged as a private members bill. It was backed up with a sophisticated American-style gun lobby campaign carried out by the Conservative Party of Canada and its allies, targeting individual opposition Members of Parliament in rural areas. Twenty-one opposition Members of Parliaments (8 Liberals, 12 New-democrats and one independent MP) cast their votes with the Conservative government. The Bill is now before Committee to be examined before it returns for third reading and if passed, moved on to the Senate.

Bill C-391 proposes to repeal registration of rifles and shotguns, a one-time form filling procedure currently free of charge that is necessary because it:

- makes gun owners accountable for their firearms and enforces the licensing provisions of the law. If gun owners are licensed but there is no record of the guns they own, they can give or sell guns to unlicensed owners without consequences. The Supreme Court said the registration provisions cannot be severed from licensing.
- is an essential tool used by police when **taking preventive action, and enforcing prohibition orders**. It is used to ensure that all firearms are removed from an individual's possession when the situation warrants it.
- helps police investigations. Two men were identified and convicted as accessories to the murder of 4 RCMP officers in Mayerthorpe, Alberta, in part because a registered gun was left at the scene of the crime.
- allows police to differentiate between legal and illegal firearms. Without information about who owns firearms legally and the firearms they own, police cannot charge individuals with illegal possession.
- allows police to trace firearms easily, thus facilitating further investigations into smuggling.
- reduces the chances that legal guns will be diverted into illegal markets.

Bill C-391 is opposed by the Coalition for Gun Control, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, the Canadian Police Association, the Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians, the Canadian Federation of University Women, the YWCA of Canada, the Canadian Labour Congress, the Canadian Auto Workers, Ontario Public Health Association, the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres, the consortium of 13 national Quebec women's groups, the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, just to name a few.

This December 6th, many Canadians will shed tears and wear white ribbons in memory of the victims. But, as Suzanne Laplante Edward has said, we need more than words and white ribbons. We need action. Twenty years after the Montreal Massacre gun control in Canada is in jeopardy.