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March 25, 2009

Prime Minister Stephen Harper

House of Commons

Ottawa, Ontario

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Dear Hon. Prime Minister Harper:

I am writing about the proposed private members bill regarding the gun registry. I would like to urge you and your party not to pass this bill as I think it poses a threat to the entire gun control system in Canada. I will explain my concerns below.

As a psychiatrist working in a rural area, I see the impact of access to rifles and shotguns all too frequently. I also make use of the registry on an intermittent basis and think that it has been helpful in preventing tragedies in my area. Prior to the strengthening of the gun control legislation, it was very difficult to get someone's rifles and shotguns taken away when they became mentally ill. No one knew whether people had guns nor did they know how many guns they had. There was virtually no way to prevent someone with mental illness from getting a gun. There was no clear mechanism to remove guns and the police were often unsure as to how to proceed when I would phone them. Different detachments would give different answers about what to do. The situation now is much more satisfactory. If there is a concern about someone having guns, or significantly, about them getting guns, not only the police but also the public, are clear about the system.

To give you an example of how the registry is used in practice, I will cite an example that happened several years ago. The wife of one of the local pastors showed up at the mental health centre upset about a letter her husband had received. The letter was a rambling and somewhat psychotic one with no obvious threats. However, the man had been known to be mentally unstable and violent towards his family. The letter frightened the people who received it and they were wondering whether they were at any risk. The first question I asked was whether they knew if he had a gun. Of course, they didn't so they were advised to contact the RCMP to explain the circumstances and have them find out if he had a gun through the registry. If he was found to have a gun, the police would have grounds to go out and investigate, something I think they would have had difficulty doing in the past without a clear threat. If the RCMP went out and found unregistered firearms, they would have grounds to remove them because of the legislation, whereas they probably would not have had grounds to do so in the past. In the past, there was no way the police could check whether someone had a gun or not.

I know of examples where the police removed guns from a local man who was depressed and another where the legislation prevented a psychotic woman with no past history of mental illness or criminal activity from obtaining guns. Both of these scenarios could easily have been tragedies involving several people, primarily their family members, had there not been mechanisms in place to deal with these situations. In Canada, about 7,000 people have been prevented from owning guns which is a lot of potential tragedies prevented. Unfortunately, none of these preventative activities makes the newspaper so people are not aware of how useful it is in practice. Had this type of system been in place in many places in the United States over the past few years, it could very well have prevented some of the tragedies that have occurred there.

Licensing of owners and registration of guns are key elements of effective gun control. Effective gun control can help to reduce and contain violence, as numerous studies and statistics show. The incidence of gun deaths and injuries are at the lowest level they have been in more than 30 years. In 1995 when the gun control law was proclaimed, there were 333 more people killed by guns in Canada than today. The rate of homicide with rifles and shotguns is down by 50%. Murders of women with guns have fallen by two-thirds.

Rifles and shotguns are the guns most often used in suicide and accidents. I have talked to too many suicidal teens and adults who have been able to get access to guns. Registration holds gun owners accountable for their firearms and reduces the chances legal guns will be sold illegally, stored improperly or used in suicides.

The fact that guns have to be registered and owners licensed does not mean that gun owners are criminals or that their guns are going to be confiscated. It does not mean that there is a conspiracy against hunting. It means that people who act in a safe manner with legal guns can hunt and sport shoot just as they have always done, albeit with the inconvenience of having to be licensed and having their guns registered. They are contributing to a safer society by complying with registration and licensing, as most Canadians who own guns have done. It is an inconvenience for hunters, farmers and gun owners but it helps people like me and the police prevent tragedies.

There is compelling evidence that the gun registry saves lives and saves taxpayers' significant amounts of money. There is compelling evidence that the gun registry has reduced crime over the years it has been in place, perhaps more than any other measure.

Canada has firearms legislation that seems to be working. It is the envy of many nations. It has some teeth, which is why it is working. Canada is one of the safest places to live on the planet. Please keep public safety the number one priority among the competing interests. Let this private members bill die.

Sincerely,

Barbara J. Kane
Clinical Psychiatrist