

COALITION

for Gun Control / pour le contrôle des armes

www.guncontrol.ca

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Continued Funding for the Firearms Program is Essential to Public Safety

- Police, public health and other safety organizations have discussed the benefits of the firearms program and its contribution to public safety.
- Dr. Richard Schabas, Ontario's former Medical Officer of Health who warned Mike Harris about water testing has sounded the alarm about recent threats to cut funding to Canada's firearms program:
"Prevention is rarely glamorous. Gun control is no exception. The deaths and injuries prevented don't grab headlines. It is often all too easy for governments to lose sight of the benefits and to see preventive programs as a tempting target for cost-cutting. As the Government of Ontario learned from the Walkerton tragedy, you never stop paying for your "savings" in prevention. I have many years of experience in health care and public health, including serving ten years as Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. Too often I have seen the tragic consequences of short-sighted actions by government."
- An Environics poll shows strong support for the firearms program even when respondents are asked explicitly whether the program should be continued in light of the cost overruns discussed in the Auditor General's report.
- The costs of the program have dominated the discussion. We also need to consider the merits and value of the firearms program.

1. The report did not address the impact or effectiveness of gun control more generally

Auditor General Sheila Fraser released a report on December 3 analysing the costs of the new firearm licensing and registration system. In the report, she stated quite clearly that it was too soon to judge its impact: *"We did not audit program efficiency or whether it is meeting its objectives."* Despite this, opponents of the legislation are characterizing her report as an attack on gun control.

2. The program spent far more than was planned Expenditures on the Firearms Program

Since the Canadian Firearms Program was approved in 1995, the total cumulative costs for the program will be an estimated \$1 billion over a nine year period (from 1995/96 through 2004/05). While "the billion dollar registry" makes a good sound bite, we do not normally consider the cumulative costs of programs in this way. At the end of 2001/02, the program reported spending \$688 million and collecting about \$80 million in revenues. This includes both the one time set up costs as well as the ongoing operating costs for licensing firearm owners, registering firearms, as well as associated communication, the National Weapons Enforcement Team (NWEST) etc. The matter being put to a vote on Tuesday March 25 is whether to approve the money required to cover planned costs for this fiscal year. It is not "new money". Originally \$72 million was requested. That has been reduced to \$59 million and will bring total expenditures for 2002/3 to \$100 million. An exceptional expense surrounds the one time registration of 6 million firearms to be completed by mid 2003. By 2008/9 program costs are expected to stabilize at about \$70 million per year.

(a) Compare these costs to the costs of the old system

It is worth noting that savings to local police as a result of centralizing the system is approximately \$30 million per year, (\$270 million over the period in question would have been spent even if nothing had changed) but this was not addressed in the Auditor General's Report. Under the old system 2/3 of gun owners did not have valid Firearms Acquisition Certificates (they were required

to acquire guns not to possess them) and only restricted weapons were registered. There were over 6 million firearms in circulation and no one knew who had them. The new system also adds real time access for police (including search by address capability) along with continuous eligibility checks and spousal notification. In short, the new system vastly improves upon the old system and provides a greater amount of information to law enforcement authorities.

Summary of Old Versus New Systems (CGC)

	Bill C-17	Bill C-68
FAC/License for Firearm Owners	FAC to ACQUIRE firearms not to possess them 1/3 of gun owners had FACs	All firearms owners (2.2 million) must have a valid license renewable every 5 years
Screening process	Detailed 8 page questionnaire tied to risk factors such as criminal record, substance abuse, marital breakdown, job loss, mental illness etc. 2 references (signatures on form) photograph training program Information on criminal record/behavior checked through CPIC and local department where application submitted	Detailed screening process but simplified form Added requirement for spousal notification Added spousal notification line References must confirm there is no reason why the applicant should not have a firearm photograph training program Information on criminal record/behaviour checked through CPIC and National Database of Firearms Interested Persons which includes information from all local databases
Firearms	only restricted weapons (handguns and assault weapons registered) about 1 million	All firearms registered (7.9 million)
Ongoing checks	no review unless renewed FAC in order to acquire additional firearms	Continuous eligibility - monitors offenses or concerns about firearm owners and triggers review/revocation where there are public safety concerns
Police access to information	Could access FAC records in provincial firearms officers during regular business hours 8-4 Monday to Friday Search by name and DOB	Integrated access, connected with Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC)24/7 Search by address
Computer systems	Restricted weapons system managed by RCMP Provincial FAC systems managed by province	Integrated with support from some provinces and the RCMP
Customer Service	Provincial and variable, regular office hours	Call centre, Internet based etc.

(b) Lack of transparency was the focus of the AG report

The principal complaint of the Auditor General was the lack of transparency to Parliament because of the use of supplementary estimates for the bulk of expenditures rather than main estimates. Through the period in question, 70% of expenditures on the program were through supplementary estimates. This is a practice has been stopped.

Summary of Past and Projected Expenditures (CGC)

	Total Spent	Total Allocation		Comments
		Main Estimates	Supplementary Estimates	

1995/6	\$12.75m	\$11.8	\$5.5 m sups	
1996/7	\$26.14m	\$15	\$16 m sups a \$2.7 m sups b	Challenge in Alberta Court of Appeal Announced Provinces withdraw from Administration
1997/8	\$50.32m	\$12.6 m	\$41.2. sups	Regulations finalized
1998/9	\$130.8m	\$41.5 m	\$87.4. sups a \$13.7 sups c	December 1 system launched
1999/2000	\$131.25m	\$34.4	\$35 sups a \$46.2 sups b	Supreme Court Case
2000/1	\$200.36m	\$34.6	\$96.1 warrants \$49.8 sups a	Supreme Court Decision (June 2000) Licensing deadline January 2001 (2 million licenses received)
2001/2	\$136.63 m	\$34.6	\$113.8 sups a	
2002/3	\$100 m	\$35	\$59.4 sups b exclusive of accommodation (reduced from \$72m)	Registration deadline January 2003 (+ 6 months) Money is urgently needed to process backlog
CUMULATIVE TOTAL	\$788 m			
2003/4 (see appendix)	\$113.1 m			Registration backlog
2004/5 (estimates)	\$100m			
2005/6 (estimates)	\$75m			Approximately 2 million licenses issued in 2000 will need to be renewed. Bill C10A, if passed, allows this to be extended over 4 years.
2006/7 (estimates)	\$75m			license renewal bulge
2007/8 (estimates)	\$75m			license renewal bulge
2008/9 (estimates)	\$67 m			Steady state

Note: amount spent is different than amount requested.

(c) Most of the money was spent on licensing firearm owners NOT registering guns

Although much of the press coverage refers to "the registry", the costs of licensing firearms owners probably account for the bulk of the expenditure. The screening for licenses is labour intensive and Justice Canada decided, for a variety of reasons, to centralize the process which meant integrating information from many different police agencies. You may recall that very few licenses had actually been issued by January 2000 even though the deadline was December 31, 2001. While the original system design and cost projections were based on licensing 2 million firearm owners over a five-year period, most of this was actually done over a 12-month period requiring a huge unplanned expenditure.

(d) Politics has shaped discussion of this issue - compare to Ontario's Integrated Justice System

It is also important to note that other technology-driven projects have gone over budget. In 2001, the Auditor General of Ontario came out with a report chronicling overspending on a program entitled the Integrated Justice Project. Instituted in 1996, the project aimed to bring the justice system's antiquated filing and tracking systems up to date and allow corrections staff to quickly and securely share information on Ontario's 70,000 offenders - names, addresses, probation conditions and key dates - with police, crown attorneys and the courts. While the March 1998

cost estimate to complete the Project was \$180 million, the March 2001 estimate had risen to \$359 million. Over the same period, expected benefits were reduced from \$326 million to \$238 million and several delays were expected.¹ The project was scrapped in October 2002². The unique aspect of the current licensing and registration situation is the amount of attention it has garnered, largely due to the political considerations involved and a force of dedicated and vocal opponents.

3. There were reasons for the cost over runs

We are not defending government overspending or management. However, we have known for some time and it has been a matter of public record that the costs of setting up and operating this system are higher than anticipated.

Many of the very people who are complaining about the costs are those very people who drove the costs up by doing everything in their power to block the legislation.

- 1) The original plans and cost estimates were based on assumptions that the existing system administered by the provinces could be enhanced to support the additional requirements in the legislation. In the summer of 1994 there was a Joint Application Development and Design meeting involving the provincial Chief Firearm Officers that developed a conceptual framework for the new system based on the previous experience implementing provincial systems to support Kim Campbell's legislation. Opponents pushed the provinces to withdraw support for implementation in fall 1996 forcing Justice Canada to develop capacity to deliver services it had never previously provided.
- 2) New requirements were added to the system to respond to recommendations such as those of the inquiry into the Vernon massacre (1996) which emphasized the importance of integration of information systems. Police wanted full integration with CPIC. (The old system was not accessible on line)
- 3) Opponents fought the law all the way to the Supreme Court which did not rule on the law until early 2000, creating uncertainty and delaying implementation for 2 years.
- 4) Opponents discouraged gun owners from complying with the law claiming that it would be struck down or that registration would lead to confiscation.
- 5) They fought the implementation of the regulations that would allow implementation of the law. In the end the government had to license almost 2 million gun owners in 1 year - 2000 - to meet the deadline rather than the 4 years planned for in the law.
- 6) The system was designed on the assumption that 10% of license applications would need secondary review because of errors or "flags". In fact 40-50% of applications contained errors, again driving up system costs.
- 7) Modifications were made to make it easier for firearm owners to complete forms and comply with the law but every change required further system changes.
- 8) Firearm owners complained about fees so the government waived them in order to encourage compliance. The original plan called for cost recovery through user fees. Instead gun owners pay \$12 per year for their license (\$60 over five years) to possess and unlimited number of guns. Dog owners in major cities pay \$25 every year for licenses for **each dog**.
- 9) Given the aggressive misinformation campaign waged by the gun lobby and some of its political allies at the federal and provincial level, huge expenditures were made on communications, again to encourage compliance.
- 10) Amendments to Bill C10A which would have reduced the costs were delayed.

These are explanations not excuses.

4. Prevention is not cheap

Even operating at \$70 million per year, Canada's gun control program will not be cheap. But neither are other safety and prevention programs. Consider, for example:

¹ 2001 Provincial Auditor General's Report. VFM 3.03 : Integrated Justice Project

² Brennan, Richard. "Ontario plan to modernize justice system scrapped --- Cost overruns, delays doom \$360M project" Toronto Star, October 9, 2002

- The meningitis inoculation program initiated in Quebec last fall, which came in response to 85 cases being reported in 2001, and cost the province \$125 million.
- In New Brunswick, the federal government is investing \$400 million to widen a stretch of highway (known as suicide alley) where 43 lives were lost between 1996 and 2000.

More than 1,000 people die every year in Canada as a result of guns compared to 3,000 killed in automobile crashes. No one has even been able to estimate what we spend as a nation on trying to keep highways safer - licensing drivers, registering cars, maintaining roads, running a variety of highway safety programs but the investment is enormous.

5. Stronger controls have an impact

The Auditor General's report was a purely financial analysis of the Canadian Firearms Program. Regardless, opponents are talking about dismantling the system just before the deadline for registering guns, even though it is accomplishing its objectives: to date, 90% of gun owners (over 2 million) have licensed their firearms and 85% of firearms are registered (approximately 7 million). It makes little sense to pull the plug now.

As well, police have provided concrete examples about how the system has worked to improve safety and aid in investigations. Recently before the Senate, the Canadian Police Association testified about a number of cases where the system was used to counter the illicit drug trade to support, preventative action, and to aid in criminal investigations. Similarly, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police have reiterated their support for the system as an important tool for investigating crime – a single homicide investigation costs approximately \$500,000.

Six separate public inquests have recommended that a licensing and registration system be put in place.

The system is being used to prevent people who are a threat to themselves and others from getting access to firearms:

- Since 1998, over 9,000 individuals have been refused firearms licenses or had their licenses revoked by public safety officials.
- The Canadian Public Health Association and other injury prevention groups have emphasized the data suggests that the progressive tightening of gun laws have contributed to reducing gun death and crime. In the 1980s, on average 1,400 people were killed with guns every year and by 1999 that average had declined to a 1,000 per year.
- 26,000 calls have been made to the firearms line indicating concerns about applicants for licenses (many of these are as a result of the spousal notification process)
- The on-line registration database has been used 2.3 million times since December 1, 1998. That is an average of over 2,000 times each day by police across the country. It assists investigations, provides evidence for prosecutions, and helps officers assess the likelihood of guns being present as they approach a volatile situation.

Since the regulations were not implemented until 1998, and the deadline for registration was mid-2003, it is too soon to come to any definite conclusions. However, the data suggests that the progressive tightening of legislation over this period has led to a decline in gun deaths and crime. Both Campbell's legislation in 1991 and Rock's legislation in 1995 focused on strengthening controls on rifles and shotguns.

With the progressive tightening of firearms laws:

- Firearm-related death rates overall have tended to decline
- Accidents with firearms, suicides with firearms and female homicides with firearms have declined. These are all cases where long guns predominate.
- Murder rates with rifles and shotguns have declined dramatically although murders with handguns (which are often smuggled) have remained relatively stable
- Firearm robberies are down.

6 There have been improvements to increase efficiency and reduce costs

- In response to the Auditor General's report, the Minister of Justice released a plan to improve the management, efficiency and transparency of the system and responsibility for the programme was transferred to the Solicitor General.
- Legislative changes have been made to help streamline processes and reduce costs.
- At the same time, we will be attentive to ensure that there are no changes in the name of efficiency which undermine public safety.

The Auditor General's Report: Chapter 10 is available online at <http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/reports.nsf/html/20021210ce.html>.

Appendix 1: Expenditures Budget 2003-2004 \$113 Million

Expenditure	Item
21.5 million	alternative service delivery contract service provider set up processing facility for transactions every year
8.0 million	existing facility in Mirimachi (Quebec processing included above)
16.0 million	to provinces that administer the program (Ontario, Quebec, NB, PEI) (CFO's, police services)
11.0 million	to administer program in those provinces that have opted out
4.6 million	NWEST
21.0 million	other partners eg central registry (RCMP), Customs, etc.
14.4 million	ongoing maintenance
9.2 million	administration
2.9 million	accommodation (rent and employee benefits)
4.4 million	misc
113. million	