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Monday, June 12, 2006

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Chair

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz

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Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security

Monday, June 12, 2006

• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Garry Breitkreuz (Yorkton—Melville, CPC)): I'd like to bring this meeting to order and inform you that this is meeting eight of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, Monday, June 12.

We have been given notice of motion. It has complied with the 48-hour rule.

Without any more ado, I think we'll go over to Monsieur Ménard for an explanation of why he has brought forward this motion.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, BQ): The aim of my motion is essentially to maintain the status quo until the government presents us with a proper bill, to do what it had promised to do, in other words to abolish the registration of some firearms. Although the firearms registry gave rise to a major administrative scandal, it has been useful.

For instance, since 1995, the total number of deaths involving firearms, expressed both as a percentage of the Canadian population and in absolute numbers fell by 27 per cent. That is really the most important statistic for our purposes given the increase in the population between 1995 and 2004. Even better yet, there has been a 34 per cent drop in the number of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.

There's also been a 10 per cent decrease in homicides involving firearms per 100,000 inhabitants, which is particularly significant, given that that would involve hunting rifles, long guns. Homicides involving hunting rifles decreased by 43 per cent, whereas those committed with handguns increased by 7 per cent. This indicates that there was no change in the status of handguns because they were already being registered. They had already reached their cruising speed, if you will, and there was a slight increase.

On the other hand, in the case of the specific weapons being considered, in other words hunting rifles, there's been a 43 per cent drop. Otherwise, there was a slight, one per cent increase in the number of homicides not involving firearms. The most striking finding is that the rate of women murdered with firearms decreased by 31 per cent, whereas the number of women murdered without firearms increased slightly, by 2 per cent. Armed robberies decreased by 48 per cent.

Clearly, it must be said that despite all of the registry's administrative problems it has delivered significant results in terms of public safety. That is something that will have to be considered if the government chooses to introduce a bill, as announced. I think the

first thing that should be done would be to hold hearings, to give the main stakeholder organizations a chance to state their views.

I also noted that the costs associated with registration and the firearms monitoring system have been under control since 2002, as stated in the most recent report from the Auditor General.

The savings that would arise from abolishing the long-gun registry would be relatively insignificant. When Mr. Baker testified, Mr. Comartin referred to 2 to 3 per cent, a figure he could not really refute.

Only \$14.6 million would be provided for the registration of all firearms. Yet, as Mr. Baker explained, removing only one category of weapons from the registry does not in any way decrease fixed costs such as those related to the computer system.

• (1535)

The minister himself estimated the reduction would save \$10 million. He suggested reimbursing people who have already paid for registration, which we support. That would however cost approximately \$19 million. Although the minister believes he can save \$10 million, there would be \$19 million in costs. He said he was prepared to provide for this expenditure within his budget.

The minister is referring to \$19 million, which I find rather conservative compared to the estimates of others. Actually, most of the people who register their firearms, in other words two million people, will have to renew their licences. Two million people paying \$60 each does not amount to a total of \$19 million, does it? Actually it is more like \$120 million. I think the savings would be somewhere between the conservative estimate made by Mr. Comartin and the \$10 million referred to by the minister. The savings would be minimal, given the amount the minister is prepared to reimburse and the aspects of the system he is willing to do without.

The inconvenience to hunters would essentially be removed, since there is no fee for registering weapons and the renewal fees for licences would be eliminated. What is so urgent that an order in council is required before properly introducing and debating the bill? Given what the government is prepared to give up, we can only conclude that the announcement will result in minimal savings. On the other hand, when it comes to public safety, there is evidence that the system works. Moreover, practically all of those who in the course of their duties deal with the legal and illegal use of firearms find that the registry has been very useful.

I am referring here to professional police officers, all the way up through the system. There is the Canadian Professional Police Association as well as the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police. They all praise the firearms registry, despite its shortcomings. They use it on a regular basis. It is a system that saves lives and attains public safety objectives. As I mentioned earlier on, the grounds we've been given cannot be justified financially.

These people did not even consult our committee, whose mandate it is to consider issues of public safety, before deciding to make such drastic changes to a system which saves lives. I have eloquent statistics in hand, and I am aware of others, although I don't have them before me. There has been a drop in the suicide rate, for instance.

We received letters from psychiatrists stating that section 111 of the Criminal Code is used in some crucial circumstances. For instance, some depressed patients consider suicide. There is an even worse scenario, which is that an individual may decide to kill his spouse and children before turning the gun on himself. That would be the most tragic situation which could occur.

● (1540)

Section 111 of the Criminal Code allows for communication with the firearms registry or even with a peace officer. A peace officer may apply to a court for an order to remove the weapons owned by an individual. But if there is no registry for these firearms and if the person does not cooperate, how can police officers track weapons? The same situation arises each time a person is found guilty of a criminal offence. I think that under the previous section, judges may issue orders to seize firearms. That would probably be when people are reluctant to cooperate with the police. But how can the police ensure that the person no longer owns any firearms if the registry no longer exists?

This issue clearly raises important public safety and public interest issues. I respect people who do not share my views. However, this is a democracy, and Parliament, which is divided on this issue, has heard from victim advocacy groups as well as from people who say they are scandalized by the cost overruns and the administrative scandal, as well as from the poor hunters who were inconvenienced by the mandatory questionnaires they had to fill out.

I had the opportunity to read some of those questionnaires, and perhaps they do indeed go too far. However, that is no reason to do away with them. Whenever hunters criticize the firearms registry, their association refers to the fact that they already have systems in place to ensure that hunters are responsible and well informed about the precautions that need to be taken with respect to the handling, maintenance and storage of firearms.

We only want firearms in the hands of responsible individuals. We do not want to open the door to anything else. That is what hunters' associations need to know. Also, no one should take any undue risks.

Mr. Chairman, why do you think there is a Criminal Code provision stipulating that sawing off a firearm is a criminal offence? Why do you think some people have taken to sawing off their firearms in the past?

Sawed-off shotguns are less effective. Handguns are effective by virtue of their precision. That precision would be lost. And why

would someone choose to do that? Because a sawed-off shotgun is easier to hide. Why did people start sawing off their weapons in Canada? Because it is easy to buy hunting weapons and because handguns have to be registered. Criminals found that it was easier to get access to hunting rifles, to saw them off, and to use them in armed robberies, for instance.

If you abolish the registry, it will be impossible to track long guns once they leave the store. I do not want to see this bill passed. Regardless, I wouldn't be surprised to see an increase in sawed-off shotguns. At this point, it is almost as complicated to get a long gun as it is to get a handgun. Sure, some may say that there will always be people willing to break the law. However, I do not think that those who say that would go so far as to say that because drug addicts will always be able to find drugs, all drugs should be legalized, that there is no point in passing any drug legislation if we know people are using.

● (1545)

The same thing applies to firearms. Obviously, criminals are going to try to obtain firearms illegally. However, that is done at a very high cost. To buy something illegal, you need special connections, and the people you deal with want to make considerable profits.

Once the long gun leaves the store, nothing is registered. Street gangs are currently the greatest threat to public safety in our cities and even in the rural regions. Now that we've managed to dismantle some large criminal organizations, one of the major threats are the street gangs.

For the time being, these street gangs are not very rich. They're mostly made up of youths embarking on a life of crime. These are young thugs who would have a great deal of difficulty obtaining a possession and acquisition licence. The idea doesn't even cross their mind because it is so long and complicated.

However, if there is no more control of firearms, these people simply have to find an individual, family member or group member, who can go purchase the firearm and sell it to them. So there is an immediate risk.

In my opinion, it is unthinkable for Parliament to take that risk without committees considering amendments to this bill which goes to the very heart of public safety and stems the increase in crime.

The government has followed an exceptional procedure. Rather than properly introduce the bill, which would have satisfied most of the voters it is trying to please, it has circumvented the usual parliamentary process. Why?

I'd also like to add that on page 23 of the Conservative Party of Canada federal election platform 2006, the Conservative government would "repeal the wasteful long-gun registry legislation". They do not refer to the bit they actually want to repeal. The government would also "reinvest savings from scrapping C-68" — no suggestion of anything else — "hiring front-line law enforcement officers and assisting victims of crime."

The Conservatives wanted to repeal the entire registry. But now, they have a minority government and they know where public opinion stands on this point, generally in favour of the registry, and they recognize the necessity of it. In fact, I'm wondering if they recognize that. They insist upon the fact that they're only talking about long guns, but in the platform they refer to all weapons.

Enforcement issues have been raised along with the fact that the registry is not perfect, that it is flawed in some respects. Perhaps it is, but why keep the rest of it then? They have forgotten about section 86 of the Firearms Act, dealing with the registration of police officers' firearms as well as those used in police schools. They won't touch that. I don't want to insist on that. But I have to say that there are some contradictions pointing to the fact that essentially, the government simply wanted to say that it was going to do something.

Honestly, I think that before any amendments to this legislation are made, we should hear from various witnesses. As members of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, we would not be doing our job if we did not hear from them. Until such time as a bill is duly introduced, let's keep the status quo. On the one hand, lives have been saved, and on the other hand, there aren't even any savings.

• (1550)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ménard.

I think the best way to handle this is to go through the list of people who've indicated that they want to speak, and then we'll take it from there.

The three people who are on my list so far are Ms. Kadis, Mr. Holland, and Mr. MacKenzie.

Ms. Kadis.

Mrs. Susan Kadis (Thornhill, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to second the motion, and I would like to further highlight the actual benefits of having the long gun component in the registry.

As mentioned by Monsieur Ménard, 71% of spousal homicide is done with long guns. This is very compelling information that cannot be ignored. We mustn't abandon the women who are the victims, largely, in cases of domestic violence. For us to take this step in our Parliament —and it hasn't gone through Parliament, as has been referenced—would be a step backward in our overall collective objective of achieving public safety for Canadians.

When the law and order discussions have taken place—and there have been a lot of them lately in Parliament, in legislation coming before us and being tabled—this flies in the face of what I'm hearing

from the government presently. It's at odds, clearly, as has been stated by Armand La Barge, president of the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police. It was my pleasure and privilege to work with him on occasion in my vicinity, and now, in his newer capacity, he has definitely authorized me to say that he feels quite strongly that this component must be retained. So I've had a lot of extensive discussions.

Finance has been used as a rationale, at least as far as everything we have heard to date, as to why this is being deleted or taken out. Yet, on this very committee, we heard recently that the program is now being managed reasonably well since 2002, and that the actual amount of savings would not be significant by anyone's standard.

There have been different numbers bandied about. At one committee meeting recently, it was stated that \$10 million was in fact not going to be saved from the gun registry, as had been stated to us previously. There's been a lot of misinformation.

I feel very strongly that if we do not stand up for this, we will be collectively undermining our capacity to provide our law enforcement with the maximum tools to ensure the maximum safety that we can afford to Canadians. For anyone to say, and it's been stated a lot of times here and elsewhere, that the information isn't that reliable, that the information hasn't been used to a great extent... It is exactly not true. It is not factual. It is a mistake and it is improper for anyone to say that it's not being used and used well. Apparently, the access is not 5,000 hits a day but somewhere upwards of 6,500.

Again, it's been stated in this committee that sometimes it wasn't for the gun registry. That was at the last meeting, I believe. This is not the information coming from our chiefs of police, and if we don't listen to them, then who are we listening to? If we go with a new regime, we will not know if there are five or ten long gun rifles in someone's home when we approach it. It is not enough to say, "We know there are guns." Our police need to know, the best they can, to the best of their knowledge, exactly what's taking place in a home. They need to be empowered; otherwise, they are at a great disadvantage.

As I started saying initially, this would be a message-sending to women when we have a problem with domestic violence, here and elsewhere, that we need to tackle even more seriously. Many efforts have been made, but it's not enough. We all hear of very terrible cases repetitively, too many times, too many for us to hear, and too many to actually happen. If we know that 71% of spousal homicides are done with these long guns, I ask anyone to justify taking this component out of it. Anyone who supports that is saying that we're not doing everything we can to stop, if possible, or greatly reduce, domestic violence against women in particular.

So I believe the facts are there, and I support this motion. I feel that if we go in the other direction, time will prove that it was faulty thinking and faulty direction.

We also heard that a great deal of the difficulties and the cost overruns were attributed, according to the Auditor General and Mr. Baker, directly to the opposition of the gun lobby; that was a question that I posed to her. That delayed legislation, as we well know, and led to a lot of cost overruns and problems.

So we have a significant decision to make here, as a public safety committee. We have an opportunity to avert what I believe would be a major error on Parliament's part if we went forward in this direction and deleted this component of the long gun.

• (1555)

As a committee, this is our opportunity—we haven't had an opportunity, I agree with Monsieur Ménard—to ensure that we do not contribute to reducing or undermining the safety of Canadians.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Holland.

Mr. Mark Holland (Ajax—Pickering, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's good to be a member of the committee, and to be here today. I'm glad to have the opportunity to speak to the motion brought forward by Mr. Ménard. I'll make a couple of comments.

First, I had the opportunity to serve on the Durham regional police services board for a period of time, so I got to see this particular registry in action as opposed to just talking about it in the abstract. Being there at the services board, seeing how it was used on a day-to-day basis, having an opportunity to talk with officers and with our chief at that time and the new chief, about this particular program, I got to see that it does in fact work.

Mrs. Kadis raised a number of different statistics that I think are worth mentioning. It's important to know that the vast majority of our police chiefs do support this. We have not only anecdotal evidence but real evidence that it is working on the ground and providing an important service.

I know that certain people say, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people", but the reality is that.... Two things are worth noting here. One is that you're three times more likely to die of a gunshot wound than you are of a knife wound, and killing somebody with a knife requires an enormous amount of additional *mens rea*, if you will, an additional amount of intent. You have to chase somebody down and stab them repeatedly as opposed to what it takes with just a gun, whether it's a long arm or a handgun. That's not to say ban them entirely, but they are clearly different types of things.

Something that I do think requires oversight...and I think the registry has proven itself, not only whether or not it's enforcing prohibition orders or dealing with domestic violence situations, as has been referenced, but in a number of other areas as well. Clearly there were issues with the program. I had an opportunity to sit on the public accounts committee during the last term. There's no doubt that particularly before 2002 there were serious issues with the program. I think it would be foolhardy to try to say there weren't. But as the Auditor General said—and I had an opportunity to question her on this in the public accounts committee several weeks back—those problems have largely been rectified. She has some issues with respect to having a more clearly defined mandate, I think, and a couple of other issues, but certainly there isn't anything in there that would warrant cancellation of the program.

So what do we gain by cancelling this particular program? Well, we gain a very nominal sum of money by anybody's standards. It's

disputed whether or not it's \$10 million, or less, but certainly in the context of our budget it's extremely small.

But what do we lose? Well, we lose a vital resource for our police services and something that is important in providing public safety. Certainly that doesn't add up. It doesn't make any sense. I don't think it makes sense to use pre-2002 arguments to try to kill something today that provides a useful service and something that is important.

I would say that I hope it's recognized that we are in a minority government. I'm hoping that this motion today by Mr. Ménard will carry, and that, if it does carry, the will of this Parliament will be heard on this particular issue. I do believe—ardently, and of course it'll be tested—that most parliamentarians support this particular measure, and that it would be a mistake to cancel it.

I think we need to look at it in its current context, at what it's achieving, and really ask ourselves what we would be saving in real terms if we were to kill it.

• (1600)

The Chair: Mr. MacKenzie.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie (Oxford, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Well, if it's going to pass—obviously there are more members on that side than there are on this side—I would hope that we would then bring in experts. I don't consider myself an expert, but I'm not into hypotheticals, either; I've worked in that field. I was a police chief when this was brought in. In my family, it's kind of the business—it's a son, it's a son-in-law, it's a nephew.

What you people are talking about is not about the registry. You're talking about gun control. The registry does not provide control. The control for firearms is Bill C-17. That's the safe handling, the safe storage, and the need to get an FAC. This legislation will not eliminate licensing.

The difficulty with this long gun registry is that it's fraught with errors within, first off; people are now criminals by nature of not having registered their firearms. All it does is give you some indication of long guns in a house. We already know that the danger is handguns.

Mr. Ménard talked about sawing off rifles, and shotguns. One of the reasons you saw off a shotgun is that you can't find a pistol that fires shotgun shells. That's one of the reasons for that.

When Bill C-17 came in, I would say to you that not every gun owner was particularly happy. Probably the vast majority was not pleased about the safe handling and the safe storage, where you had to put your ammunition in a different place from the firearms, where you had to get an FAC. But over time they certainly learned that this was one of the big factors in stopping accidental deaths, especially in homes where children could come across firearms that were loaded, and so on and so forth.

The other part about all of this is that our problem has always been handguns. You have used some numbers. I think you've used them mistakenly, and attributed what you see as a decline in homicides to the gun registry itself. In actual fact, I would say to you, probably the bigger reduction in that was the need for FACs and safe handling and safe storage.

We continue to see domestic homicides with firearms, with any number of weapons, and other homicides perpetrated by individuals who use weapons at hand, whether they're knives or hammers; in one case it was a toaster. Weapons don't have to be firearms, as you well understand.

To attribute reducing crime to the long gun registry is a big step, because it does nothing about reducing crime. It may have had the non-intended consequence of some people having their guns disposed of because they weren't going to go through the process of registering them, but beyond that, that was probably the limit. And those people are now finished. Those were older people who had their guns and for whatever reason decided they weren't going to register the long guns.

I would like to draw this to your attention. Certainly I'm happy to share this with you. This was an inquiry of the ministry done October 13, 2004.

Mr. Ménard, I think you would be interested in this.

It says:

Trends in crime statistics can be influenced by many factors including socio-demographic and economic changes, legislative and program changes and changes in police practices. The specific impact of the firearms program or the firearms registry cannot be isolated from that of other factors.

I'll present this to the clerk. That was in bold print from the ministry.

So I understand where you're coming from, but I think you've drawn conclusions from things that may or may not have impacted from this. To carry on the system when we can better use the resources, whether it's in actual dollars or in people operating a system....

Ms. Kadis mentioned the hits on the system. I've talked to front line police officers, and by and large those hits are automatic links in CPIC queries. You can set up your CPIC system, or your own computer system—some departments do—such that if they run a “10-28”, which is a vehicle registration check, when the name of the registered owner comes back, it also queries the firearms registry.

Make no mistake, 6,500 queries a day are not being made to the firearms registry to determine firearms. The vast majority, and I would say to you that almost all of them, are made because they're automatic links into the system.

• (1605)

The fact that you've run a car and found the registered owner's name...and the fact that the individual has firearms in his home means nothing to you. You're not interested in his home. If you ever, for one minute, walked up to a house and wanted to trust that information about whether or not there were firearms in that house, because you'd checked the registry, you'd end up with dead police officers.

They don't trust it, and they can't trust it. That's not because there's something necessarily inherently wrong with it, but you don't know that there are firearms there or not anyway. The individual who is most likely to use a firearm would have the firearm there because they'd stolen it for whatever means.

So the firearms are not going to be registered. It doesn't add to safety—of my son or my son-in-law or my nephew—and for that reason alone, I think we could use those resources in something else.

If you people are intent on supporting this motion, then I say to you, at the same time, it's time we invited people in here from both sides of the spectrum to give us a view of really what the system does or doesn't do. I suggest to you that it does less than you may have been led to believe.

The Chair: Ms. Freeman.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Carole Freeman (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, BQ): Mr. MacKenzie, thank you for your presentation.

I'd like to make one thing perfectly clear. I come from a riding with a lot of hunters. I am a lawyer by training and I have often met women who were victims of conjugal violence and were in serious trouble. I don't think enough thought is given to what the Canadian Firearms Registry represents to women. For the women's groups I meet, it's security, and I can tell you that in daily practice, there's no getting around that.

I don't want to know if the firearms registry has been used 6,500 times, because I find that deceptive, misleading and even completely inappropriate. The usefulness of the registry does not depend on the number of times it is used, it depends on the relevance of those uses. When women are in danger, it's extremely important to know where the weapons are so that they can be recovered. People trivialize the fact that the registry provides security to women in Canada. I come from Quebec and I am here for other reasons, but I think that aspect is trivialized far too much.

I'd like to share some statistics with you. Since the registry came into being, the number of women murdered with a firearm has dropped by 31 per cent. I have to tell you that those are not trivial statistics. I don't know how many times politicians have consulted the registry, but it's nice to know that the number of homicides has dropped by 31 per cent.

I studied at the Université de Montréal. What happened at L'École Polytechnique made a profound impression on all of us. I don't think that can be trivialized and the registry scrapped. It may be full of flaws, but it still has some advantages.

I think people forget what firearms mean to women and I feel obliged to highlight those concerns again. The murder rate in the United States is three times higher than in Canada. The murder rate for women is five times higher than in Canada. The number of women murdered with a firearm in the United States is eight times higher than in Canada. These differences are largely attributable to the fact that firearms are better controlled in Canada than in the United States.

Since the inception of the Canadian Firearms Registry in 1995, the number of women murdered with a firearm dropped by 30 per cent, whereas the murder rate for women went up slightly by 2 per cent.

For all these reasons, the registry is extremely important to women. Women are particularly satisfied with section 111 of the Criminal Code, because it provides that if their husband is suffering from a major depression... We're talking about the lives of ordinary people in all of our ridings. One of the very few ways of taking the firearms away from these partners is under a provision like section 111. Section 111 applies to husbands who are becoming increasingly violent and enables women to go to the police and to the courts for an order.

For all of the reasons I have just given, I am going to support Mr. Ménard's motion. You really have to think of all those women and all those lives that have been saved. That's what I wanted to say, Mr. Chairman.

•(1610)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll just give you an idea of who's on the list here: Mr. Hawn, Mr. Lee, Mr. Comartin, and then Mr. MacKenzie.

Mr. Hawn.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As my colleague said, seven—minus four—obviously will prevail, if that's the case, but I want to make a couple of points.

I agree with my colleague that if we are going to do this, then we need to call in a lot more folks to talk about it who have the actual experience. We talk about front line police officers, and I have a bit of a problem with that. I've talked to an awful lot of front line police officers, most recently an assistant commissioner with the RCMP, and I have not talked to a single front line police officer who would rely on this, or has relied on it, to any extent at all. I just have a hard time with people who tell me that's the case, because I know it's not.

In terms of the 6,500-hits-a-day discussion, when you say that it's inappropriate to question that, I'm sorry, it's entirely appropriate to question that. The misinformation that comes out because of that misquoted statistic skews the argument. To say that we have 6,500 hits or queries to the gun registry, and therefore it must be useful—it's just not true. My colleague has explained why that happens. I suggest to you that you know that's true. The experience in the U.K. and Australia, with similar draconian legislation—and they've had it longer than we have—has proven that it doesn't work.

The École Polytechnique was obviously a horrible crime. The gun registry would not have stopped what happened at the École Polytechnique. You cannot stop a madman who is intent on carrying out a crime like that. It would not have had any impact whatsoever.

We talk about the drastic measures that we're being told we're trying to take, but we're not talking about repealing Bill C-17 at all. That's been there for a long time and it's going to stay there. Criminal behaviour hasn't changed. We're not talking about the inanimate object, we're talking about the person. When you talk about equating drugs with guns, drugs are not legal, period. Firearms are legal, with restrictions, which we have in Bill C-17.

The firearms causing most of the damage in Canada are illegal firearms. Obviously criminals don't register their firearms, and we know that. Those guns are not coming, by and large, from peoples' basements, they're coming across the border. That's a fact. Any police association will tell you that. Canada Border Services will tell you that. Nobody is going to deny that women, that Canadians, that everybody needs protection from people who will intentionally cause them damage.

I have another problem with quoting statistics that go back to 1995 when the long gun registry didn't even come into effect until 1998. Reductions from between 1995 and 1998 have nothing to do with the question at hand. My problem with this argument always has been, on any side of an argument, that people use misleading data, misleading statistics, and half-truths to suit their arguments. Everybody on any side of an argument does that, and I'd be the first to acknowledge that.

I'd just like to finish with the suggestion that, if we are going to do this, we do indeed call some witnesses, including—no kidding—front line police officers, not chiefs of police associations. I don't know why some of them have done the politically expedient thing that they have done, but I can tell you that up to and including assistant commissioners of the RCMP, they're not buying this. Frankly, I don't buy it either.

So if we are going to go down that road, there are lots more folks we need to talk to, and I would urge that we do that.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

•(1615)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lee.

Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River, Lib.): The words I just heard were that if we're going to go down that road, then we need to talk to lots more folks. I heard Mr. MacKenzie's words as well. I have to subscribe to those, and I agree, but I would urge that upon not you gentlemen but upon the government, which is not sitting here with us today. The government appears to have chosen the course to go down that road without talking to a whole lot of these people. I would think that the burden is really on the government to go through this small process rather than just proceed blindly to fulfill a campaign promise. I'd be delighted to go through the exercise.

I can admit that, quite a few years ago, I was pretty cautious about adopting a long gun registry. I was one of the skeptics on the Liberal side. At great risk to my career, I pushed back for a number of years. What changed the dynamic was the recognition that long guns were a problem. It doesn't take long to pick out examples.

One of the reasons we never did see the examples clearly was that when you look at long guns, for the most part you see them in the hands of legitimate recreational hunters. No big problem; there's a safety issue, perhaps, but not a Criminal Code problem. You have competition shooters; no problem there. You have collectors, historical re-enactments; no big problems there. And you have sustenance hunters, particularly in the far north, where they use the long gun for food.

Those are legitimate things. That's generally how we saw the long guns being used in Canada. It would be impossible to look at that piece and say there's a huge criminal problem, because it's part of the heritage of our country.

There are three things, and I think they've all been mentioned here, that are notable. One of them is that 71% of the firearms assaults against women involve long guns. If you're a male, you're looking at 29%. If you're female, you're looking at 71%. You get a different perspective there. So your average female Canadian citizen is going to say to us in Parliament, "Hello, there's a problem here. We're not sure exactly what it is, but it involves long guns, not handguns."

The second thing, the big event that crystallized the whole gun control movement, was the Polytechnique killings. It involved the mini Ruger, a long gun. The event that crystallized this whole issue involved a long gun. In the most recent event, as awful and as tragic as it was, four RCMP officers in Mayerthorpe were killed with long guns. So we would be putting our heads in the sand if we were to suggest that the long gun was not a problem, given what we know now.

As we believe the government is proceeding on this, there has not been a review of whatever cost savings there might be. It's not like saving money is the only thing we're looking for here, but it would be relevant, what it costs. We'd also want to look at what the benefit has been. There are differing views about what benefits are out there.

Do police officers check the system? Of course they do. Is it 6,500, is it 1,000, is it 3,000 hits a day, a week, or whatever? We know they do check, and various police officers speak to it differently. It's quite possible that they use it differently from town to town, city to city, province to province. They make use of this background information differently when they access CPIC or whatever other access they have to the gun registry.

• (1620)

The data we have in terms of crime...and I'll be the first to admit that what I'm going to say now relates more to the sociology piece, perhaps, than it does to the strict benefits of having a gun control regime in place. Statistically we have seen relatively huge improvements in the safety of Canadians over the last five to ten years, part of which is under the regime of the gun registry. Now, I cannot claim that a single benefit has come from the gun registry, because I can't prove it, but I think we have had benefits.

The homicide rate for women killed by firearms has dropped by almost 67% in the last ten years or so. A 67% drop in the last ten years: I wouldn't mind knowing how that came about. Was it gun control? It could have been. Did we take all the orphan firearms off the wall of the kitchen? Did we remove them from the hands of individuals who really shouldn't have had access? Or was it just fortuitous that the 71% of women who get assaulted with long guns...or is that related to the 67% drop in the killing of women in the last ten years? That's huge. If I were a woman, I would say, "Whatever you're doing, keep doing it." That's a huge drop.

The homicide rate with rifles and shotguns has also fallen by a similar percentage, 68%, over the same period. Homicides with firearms dropped 37%, which contrasts with the women's piece. The

women's piece, I will remind you, was a 67% drop. The general rate was only 37%.

In 2003, compared with 1991, 652 fewer people were killed with firearms. That's 652 less. For one year, 652 souls continued to live because of a drop in the homicide rate with firearms.

So there are some good things happening, partly, I argue, as a result of the firearm registry, but it couldn't possibly be just the firearm registry. There are some good things happening.

In view of the fact that we have this status quo where we do have a firearm registry, and I know the government's considering dispensing with the long gun portion of registration, I think the burden really is on the government, or perhaps on Parliament, to investigate, to check, to clarify the reasons why we would change that status quo. I would be interested in getting into that, but I don't know how long that inquiry would take. We certainly aren't going to do it before we break for the summer.

I think the committee quite appropriately urges caution at this point in time. I would support the motion that the government not proceed, or even not proceed until it's had a chance to check out some of these things.

I'll stop there.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you.

Are you suggesting that we check that out immediately? Is that a motion?

Mr. Derek Lee: No, I'm kind of ad idem with some of the other members who've spoken here, that somebody ought to be....

If the government doesn't want to check it, because they feel bound by a campaign promise, that's okay. But Parliament isn't bound by a campaign promise. Part of our job here is to scrutinize what government does.

I don't want to urge that upon colleagues—this is something the steering committee should handle—but the motion speaks for itself. It's not hard for me to support the motion, but it's up to the committee generally to decide if it wants to embark on an inquiry. This is probably the only committee in Parliament that would be able to do it unless the Senate, the other place, wanted to do it.

The Chair: Mr. Comartin.

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to pick up on Mr. Lee's final point and then make a couple of specific points.

This motion is really trying to communicate to the government that it's their responsibility to justify what they are doing behind closed doors but should be doing in public. They have legal opinions that say they cannot get rid of the long gun registry, because it's mandated for the Government of Canada to deliver a long gun registry—I'm aware of at least two legal opinions that tell them that—and that they should not be proceeding, as they appear to be intent on doing, without bringing an amendment to the House of Commons to see if they can get that law changed.

Until they do that, it's irresponsible and imprudent for them to proceed. It's also undemocratic. For a government that has gone into power claiming corruption in the government before them, and accountability and all those other buzzwords, taking this approach is really quite hypocritical.

The motion is very appropriate at this time. I would hope that we would get a positive response from the government, but I'm not really expecting it, given how much political capital they've invested in this issue.

Mr. Chair, I want to touch on a couple of specifics raised by members of the Conservatives, Mr. MacKenzie in particular, on the whole issue of the hits that are coming. All of those are going to occur. If you proceed with this, every one of those hits will occur, because they're still going to be looking to see if there are handguns, if there are restricted weapons, in those residences. So nothing's going to change; therefore, the cost of the registry is going to continue on, even if we get rid of the long gun registry. It's not going to save one penny in that regard, from what I can see. There will be the savings in some staff, because we'll start laying people off who accept the registrations of the long guns, but beyond that there are no savings here. The costs will go on.

The point of the unintended consequences is, of course, one of the advantages we would have if we did take evidence on this. I have no reason to oppose that. In fact, I would welcome it. There were significant unintended consequences. We got between one million and two million guns out of the hands of people who didn't want to use them. The guns were being stolen, were being used improperly, weren't being stored safely. That was one of the unintended consequences. It wasn't planned.

As Madam Freeman was saying, it certainly significantly raised the level of comfort for women in particular, because we know that women are the major recipients of violence from long guns in domestic relations, far outweighing the rest of society or women's partners.

You know, Mr. Chair, if we were really serious about dealing with crime as a result of handguns, we'd be enforcing the long gun registry. We'd be enforcing the entire registry. The provinces, particularly the western provinces, have chosen not to do that. I think that's being irresponsible. But if we really wanted to get at it, rather than spending all of the effort we're doing to avoid the enforcement, if we actually enforced, we would probably drive down the statistics on gun-related crimes.

To Mr. Hawn and Mr. MacKenzie, you can talk all about the anecdotal evidence you get from speaking with...because I speak to police officers as well, but the reality is that the chiefs of police and

the professional police association have gone on record, with votes, democratic votes within both those organizations, to continue to support the registry. They want to see the savings, which I believe have now occurred, but they're not done. There are still more efficiencies to be built in once the computer system is functioning.

At any rate, the point I want to make is that since the new year, I've been at two funerals for police officers, one in my home riding. That officer was killed with a handgun. It was in Laval, outside of Quebec. That young woman police officer was killed with a long gun.

• (1630)

You know this, Mr. Chair, because you were here when we received the letter from the chief of police here in Ottawa. It pointed out what I thought was an interesting and rather compelling statistic. If you go back the last 20 years, including the last 10 years since the registry has been in place, more police officers have been killed with long guns than with handguns.

That's not in any way to deny the current problem, the increased usage of handguns. That's very clear, and we know why that's happening. They're being smuggled in at a much higher rate from the United States than they were five and seven years ago, mostly because of the biker gangs. We need to deploy resources there.

Again, we need to do more enforcement in those areas, but getting rid of the long gun registry does nothing at all to deal with that problem. It doesn't deal at all with the reality that long guns remain a crime problem. There's no question that the percentages have changed. We have more handgun problems, but in absolute numbers we have as many long gun problems as we had before—other than, as you heard the statistics from Mr. Ménard and Ms. Freeman, the suicides have gone down, the accidental deaths have gone down, and the domestic violence has gone down with regard to long guns.

But it's there. I'm not naïve, I'm not sticking my head in the sand, and I'm not pretending we don't have a problem with handguns and restricted weapons. We do, and it's gotten worse in the last few years. But the reason it's gotten worse has nothing to do with long guns. The long guns problem has not decreased. It's still there, other than, again, the savings that I just talked about.

Coming back to the motion itself, it seems to me that it's very appropriate. I'm hoping the government will take the message that it's their responsibility. It's the government's responsibility to prove that they should amend that legislation, and they should do it in that process, not in reverse order, not do it behind the scenes, not do it without that authority of Parliament.

That's what they're supposed to do. All the steps they're taking right now to dismantle the long gun registry should cease immediately. That's what the motion is really about. We should have some hearings on this. The committee should take that on. But until that is done and until that amendment is through the House—and I don't believe it is ever going to get through the House—they should stop what they're doing.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: With the committee's permission, there is one statistic you have come up with, Mr. Comartin, that I have not yet heard. You said that one million to two million guns were taken out of the hands of those who shouldn't have them. Where did you get that?

Mr. Joe Comartin: That comes from the firearms—

Mrs. Carole Freeman: Coalition.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Yes.

I'm sorry, Ms. Freeman is right; it's from the coalition.

The Chair: Mr. MacKenzie.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: I'd like to reiterate a couple of things.

First off, Bill C-68 is not gun control. That's where we have the problem. Registering the firearms is not gun control. Gun control was Bill C-17, where people have to get an FAC.

One of the reasons for the decline in some of these statistics is the fact that FACs came in. Police officers had to do background checks. People were declined the opportunity to get firearms.

When we talk about long guns, you're making, in my mind, far too many assumptions that Bill C-68 reduced these.

I think, Mr. Comartin, you made the point perfectly clear when you talked about the two police officers who were killed. One was killed with a handgun, one was killed with a long gun. In the case of the handgun, the man was under a court order not to have firearms except for hunting purposes. He could have them for hunting.

• (1635)

Mr. Joe Comartin: With the long gun.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: Yes...oh, I'm sorry. But the fact is that it was a long gun that this man was prohibited from having except for the purposes of hunting.

Mr. Joe Comartin: If the law had been enforced, that man would not have had that gun. He was not qualified to have that gun. He was mentally unstable. The act would have prevented him from having the gun. It was overridden by the judge.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: By the court. And that's my point about this. That man shouldn't have had a gun in the first place, whether it was a long gun or a handgun. That's not gun control, what happened there.

On this whole issue about the long guns and the firearms, I want every police officer to know where the firearms are. It doesn't matter how many firearms there are; if there's one firearm, I would like the police officer to know it's there. It doesn't matter whether there's one or twenty; it doesn't make any difference. And that's the situation with those cases.

Bill C-68 does not make life safer for police officers. We're saying let's get rid of the long gun registry, but people still have to have a licence. Police officers can still check the system, and will check the system, to be sure that there's... Well, it will tell them if firearms *should* be there, it won't tell them if firearms *are* in the house.

Make no mistake, it doesn't change that part, and that's the part where we're saying that people have to be licensed to have a firearm. It doesn't matter what kind of a firearm. Registering a long gun

doesn't change the situation and it doesn't make life safer for police officers or for you or me.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Norlock.

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): I'd like to address Ms. Kadis and Mrs. Freeman with regard to how long guns equate to the safety of our women and our society.

I don't want to flog the fact, over and over again, that I was a policeman for 30 years. I wasn't a chief of police. Most of my career was front line policing. My career started at a time when, quite frankly, women were not well served by the law enforcement community. When we would go to a domestic, once we sorted it out and separated the combatants, we usually told the woman that she should find a safe place, and in the morning, if she really wanted to pursue it, we'd help her contact a justice of the peace to lay an information. I can tell you, that bothered a lot of front line policemen such as me. But policemen follow the rules and regulations of their department.

The opposite is true today, thank goodness; the policeman's on the hook, basically. The policeman is told they have to make sure that the woman is safe, that the children are taken to a place of safety. Better still, as I used to say, why should we be taking them anywhere? We should just arrest the husband, or the offending person in the residence—on rare occasion, that happens to be a woman—and place them in jail for a bail hearing the next day. That's a totally appropriate thing to do, in my view. There should be zero tolerance for domestic violence.

When you bring up the fact that women feel safer, and the statistics—you say statistics, I say anecdotal evidence—in terms of the long gun registry making women feel safer, I can only look at my own experience. Before we had the long gun registry, even before we had the FAC program, we used to call it... Excuse me, I've been out of policing for a while, so I can't recall the specific section of the Criminal Code; there used to be a section 100. If you went to a house where there was a domestic situation, or if there was a threat of a domestic situation, and the woman told us in fear, "My husband has guns," we went and we seized the firearms. We went to a judge and we instigated a hearing as to whether or not the husband, in most cases, should have firearms. Most of the time the judge agreed, or at least there was a cooling-off period where the marital situation could be dealt with.

The FAC system, before the long gun registry, wasn't perfect. I personally think the FAC system should have been a little bit more in-depth. We can do that here, and that's what this government proposes to do.

You know, one of the terrible things...and I have to be very careful here, because everything you say will end being misconstrued. I think we have to try to take the politics out of certain situations. This is one area in which, I must say, I know that every single person around this table, and all 308 members of Parliament, really do care about the safety and well-being of the citizens they represent.

I guess some people in our country wonder, “These guys are saying that if this happens, it's the end of life as we know it,” or “They hate women.” I really think all of us, all 308 members, want what's best for our society. But the people who I represent, or many of the people who've spoken to me with regard to the long gun registry, feel it's one more step toward the government coming in and ruling their lives.

Two of the countries that have increased their control over firearms ownership in their societies are Australia and Great Britain. Quite frankly, I've seen statistics indicating that certain firearm offences have gone up 100% in those countries. This is in Great Britain, where even the police don't carry guns. Gun violence has gone up.

• (1640)

We're not the United States. We're a different society. We're a blend of the European way of doing things and the North American way of doing things. I think the vast majority of firearms owners are responsible individuals who don't mind going through an FAC questionnaire, who don't mind being asked the questions that should be asked to see if they are indeed proper people to possess firearms, with police background checks, and, quite frankly, with their spouses being interviewed, which occurs. But I don't really see where the registration of a long gun will add to the protection, quite frankly, of the average citizen.

I can tell you that the father of one of the officers killed in Mayerthorpe sent me a letter—which I have—and it was a very supportive letter, saying that our party was on the right track with regard to this. I'm reticent to ever bring up the life or death of an officer and politicize it. I would like to say some things here that I will not say. But quite frankly, I think there may be some officers alive today if we were to enforce the Criminal Code much better than we do, from the standpoint of all the people involved in our Criminal Code system; I will not point the finger at any one.

I really think, if some of the laws we have were properly enforced, we probably wouldn't be here discussing some of the things we are discussing. But they aren't, and that's one of the reasons I got involved in politics. I didn't like the direction our country was going in, and I really think now we are going in the right direction with this government.

That's the politicization, in general, but in particular, I would never, ever be part of a government that would disadvantage the life of any group of people in our society, least of all our women, I can tell you that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Our last speaker is Mr. Alghabra—

Ms. Kadis has a point of order.

Mr. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga—Erindale, Lib.): I'll defer to Ms. Kadis.

The Chair: Ms. Kadis.

Mrs. Susan Kadis: Mr. Chair, I have an amendment to the motion. I know we're moving toward calling the question.

I'd like to move, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), that the chair or vice-chair of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security report to the House within five sitting days of the adoption of this motion by the committee.

The Chair: Can the chair make one little comment in regard to the motion? I've been biting my tongue the whole time here, because of course some of the statistics quoted have been somewhat misleading.

Monsieur Ménard, Mr. Comartin, some of you have assumed that the—

• (1645)

Mr. Mark Holland: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Can I just finish, please?

Mr. Mark Holland: We have the amendment before us, so maybe we should deal with the amendment and then speak to the main motion.

The Chair: We haven't started the voting on anything yet.

Mr. Mark Holland: No, but my point is that there's a motion before the committee right now. We're dealing with the amendment. I'm just saying that procedurally we should deal with the amendment and then go back to the main motion. Certainly I wouldn't have any problem—

I move that we call the question, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: There's no debate?

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: We can now deal with the main motion. We're going to go back to debate.

Go ahead.

Mr. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to say that, as an average Canadian, it would be very difficult for me to say no to a law that requires an individual to register any type of firearm that can be deadly. But before jumping to any conclusion on that, I decided to meet with the chief of police of Peel region, where I reside. I had a frank discussion with the chief. I wanted him to talk with him about it so that I wouldn't be totally tainted, maybe, by my own biases. He was very firm about maintaining the registry as it is. The registry, along with the gun control legislation, is a tool that police officers use as a preventative measure to protect the safety of Canadians. It's a preventative measure.

Yes, we need other measures to protect the safety of Canadians, but this is one instrument that police officers have been telling us about. I really hope we don't dismiss the arguments that police officers are bringing forward to us, as parliamentarians, as the government. They're telling us that they use these tools.

So we should not dismiss arguments that may not agree with what we believe is necessary, and we should take them seriously. I know that a few police chiefs have said it was maybe not that effective, but the majority of police chiefs have said that their police officers use it on a daily basis. It's the combination with the gun control measures we have that gives police officers the ability to know where guns are.

On another level, it's a deterrent for gun owners to act irrationally occasionally. Most gun crimes are committed without any premeditation. If a gun owner knows that his or her gun is registered, it's another deterrent for them; they'll think twice before committing a crime. Perhaps that's the reason why a lot of gun crimes are not committed by guns that are registered.

This government is not only dismantling the gun registry, it is also providing amnesty for people who want to own long guns. It's a concern. The burden is on the government to explain why it wants to dismantle the existing gun registry, as it works.

Thank you.

• (1650)

The Chair: Mr. MacKenzie.

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: I thought that the members opposite, when they spoke, all agreed that we needed to get some people in here to talk about this thing, whether it works or it doesn't work, as opposed to "My idea", or individual ideas on that side. Why would we be moving ahead on this motion until we have called some of those people before the committee, people who can talk to us from a professional perspective?

I mean, I still hear from across the table the same arguments, that this is some kind of gun control. To understand the system, we need to bring people forward.

The motion talks about hunters. This isn't just about hunters. It's about the safety of Canadians.

Mrs. Freeman, with all due respect, I have as much concern about women as you do. All of our people do. We have all worked in that area. I agree with my friend Mr. Norlock that we did a terrible disservice to women for the first 100 years of this country in domestic violence. I think we're doing a far better job, and there are things we can still do, but you know what? It doesn't change this. Instead of us having some sort of a reaction here, without having experts, we're doing a disservice to all Canadians.

I heard from the members opposite that they thought it was a good idea. I'm wondering why we've changed in the last few minutes, and why we want to go ahead with this motion without having some experts come forward.

The Chair: Can I just pick up on that point?

How do we handle that? Does the committee want to hear from witnesses?

Is that an amendment you're going to make?

Mrs. Susan Kadis: You have to call the question on the motion that's before us right now, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: But you can propose an amendment.

Mr. Serge Ménard: Can I speak to that?

The Chair: Yes, Monsieur Ménard.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Ménard: It would have been nice if you had made the same argument to your minister at your caucus meeting. Before

changing the rules, the legislation should have been changed, and the experts should have been heard here in committee. What would you have said if the Liberal government, when announcing changes to the marijuana legislation, had announced that pending the amendments to that legislation, everyone could smoke and traffic in marijuana in Canada and that there would be an amnesty? You would have said that before amending the marijuana legislation, you needed to hear from the experts.

Mr. MacKenzie, quite honestly, I think you are misinterpreting what you have heard here. If you think about it carefully, you will see that you are misinterpreting it. All we meant to say on this side of the table is that before changing the rules under the current legislation, the experts should have been heard. Since we haven't heard from any experts before amending the legislation, we are of the view that the legislation should apply as it was passed by Parliament. That's what Mr. Comartin clearly said.

If you wish to present a motion for us to hear from the experts, that, in my opinion, would be a way of delaying consideration of an urgent motion, and we will vote against it.

[English]

Mr. Dave MacKenzie: If that's the way you feel, fair enough, but there were amnesties before, and I don't think this happened during that time. If you want to run that risk.... You're the people who said we should hear from the experts. If you want to go ahead and vote without hearing from them, you do that at your own peril.

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

And by the way, procedurally, we won't vote until there are no more speakers.

• (1655)

Mr. Laurie Hawn: Just briefly, in support of what Mr. MacKenzie has said, we're not talking about changing the law, we're talking about an amnesty, which happened, by the previous government, eight times. We're not talking about changing the law.

I'd just like to make one comment on Mr. Alghabra's point, because I think he refuted his own point. He talked about somebody who commits a crime of passion, an unpremeditated crime. They're not going to think twice because their guns are registered. It's a crime of passion. They don't care whether the gun is registered or not. It's a crime of passion. They're not thinking, period. So it's irrelevant whether the gun is registered or not. It's clearly irrelevant. In a crime of passion, by definition, you're not thinking very clearly. He's not going to care whether his gun is registered or not. That's silly.

The Chair: Mr. Holland.

Mr. Mark Holland: I move that we call the question, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The debate is concluded? All right.

(Motion as amended agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Meeting adjourned.

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