

**Statement by the
Canadian Labour Congress**

**to the
House of Commons
Standing Committee on Public Safety and
National Security
Regarding Bill C-391,
An Act to amend the
Criminal Code and the Firearms Act**

May 2010



Canadian Labour Congress
Congrès du travail du Canada

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On behalf of the 3.2 million members of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), we want to thank you for affording us the opportunity to present our views. The CLC brings together Canada's national and international unions along with the provincial and territorial federations of labour and 130 district labour councils whose members work in virtually all sectors of the Canadian economy, in all occupations, in all parts of Canada.

The CLC opposes Bill C-391 and urges the Standing Committee to ensure the long gun registry is maintained.

We appreciate the debate about gun control and the gun registry in particular can be difficult, and is sometimes emotional. But we should place this debate within the perspective of the Canadian experience. In a recent poll, 72 per cent of Canadians said they did not own firearms. 26 per cent of Canadians reported living in a home where firearms are present. Just 11 per cent of Canadians are gun owners themselves.¹

The Legislative and Political Context

Although handguns have been regulated since the 1930s, regulation of rifles and shotguns began in 1977 with the introduction of the Firearms Acquisition Certificate (FAC) and new requirements to record sales and transfers of those firearms. At the time Tommy Douglas, leader of the New Democratic Party, lamented the fact that the law did not go further, stating "Half a loaf is better than none," and predicting "I believe that someday we will have the techniques to register all guns."²

The laws were further strengthened in 1991, two years after the massacre at Montreal's École Polytechnique which saw fourteen women murdered in their classrooms and in the case of one of the victims, her workplace. Mandatory training courses for gun owners and a 28-day

1 Leger Marketing Poll, December 2009

2 CBC Archives, "Montreal Massacre gun law" http://archives.cbc.ca/version_print.asp?page=1&IDLan=1&IDClip=2241&IDDossier=0&IDCat=354&IDCatPa=262

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waiting period were some of the key pieces of the legislative change in 1991 along with stronger screening to acquire firearms, safe storage and a ban on some military weapons.

In 1995, additional gun control measures were introduced with Bill C-68. The CLC submitted a brief in support of the legislation, the current Firearms Act. We did so because of support from our members, in resolutions passed by delegates at our conventions, for different forms of gun control in Canada. We continue to support the provisions of the Firearms Act.

We agreed with the law's requirement for gun owners to obtain a license to own a gun – which under the law was renewable every five years – and to register the firearms in their possession. This aspect of the law supplies the details on the firearms licensed gun owners had in their possession.

The long gun registry itself tracks guns to a particular owner. Each firearm is registered back to its owner and the household address. The registry does not impose limits on use or access. One needs a firearms licence – renewable every five years – but the registration of each firearm is one-time only. Once a firearm is registered it need not be re-registered unless it is sold or traded. To date over 2 million gun owners have licenses and over 7 million firearms are registered. Once a person has a firearm license they can purchase as many guns as they want and are simply required to register those firearms and to store them safely.

The system is really no different than the vehicle registration system in Canada. Canadians generally must obtain a licence from their province in order to drive, but they can own as many vehicles as they want – they simply have to register those vehicles, and pay a registration fee for each vehicle.

In fact, the gun registry is less onerous for Canadians than registering their vehicles. Today, gun owners do not have to pay to register their guns, they need only store their guns safely. Yet car owners continue to be required to pay a registration fee for each of the vehicles they own, are required to pay for insurance and face a number of use restrictions reflecting Canadian standards for safe driving.

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As we stated fifteen years ago to the parliamentary committee of the day, there are compelling arguments in favour of the gun registry:

- to enforce safe storage requirements
- to ensure that gun owners are held accountable for the guns they purchase
- to compel gun owners to report missing or stolen firearms
- to reduce the illegal trade in rifles and shotguns
- to give the police and first responders modern tools to take preventative action
- to trace back stolen guns to their rightful owners.

After a decade of use, we have seen crimes solved and criminal prosecutions because of the registry. For example, two people were convicted as accessories in the 2005 killings of four RCMP officers in Meyerthorpe, Alberta, in part, because a registered rifle, left at the scene, was traced back to its owner through the registry.

One can debate for many hours the legitimacy of the statistics that are put forward by opponents of the registry and proponents of the registry. But there is no doubt in our minds that the registry and the other gun control measures introduced in the 1995 Firearms Act have worked. Dismantling the registry is simply the wrong move.

The Role in Public Safety

Rifles and shotguns are the guns most available in people's homes.

They are the guns most often used to kill police officers.

They are the guns most often used in domestic violence situations. A study conducted between 2005 and 2007 on rural domestic violence in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick showed 66% of women interviewed felt having a firearm in their home made them fearful for their safety.³

3 "Exploring the Links: Firearms, Family Violence and Animal Abuse in Rural Communities" EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, Doherty, D. & Hornostry, J.
<http://www.unbf.ca/arts/CFVR/documents/FirearmsFamilyviolenceexecutivesummary.pdf>

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Rifles and shotguns are the guns most often used in suicides, particularly those involving youth. In communities where there is high gun ownership rates, you see higher youth suicide rates. However since the gun registry and its related requirements for safe storage of guns were introduced, youth suicide rates by firearms have declined in relation to suicide rates by other means.

Murders of women by rifles and shotguns have decline substantially in relation to murder rates of women by other means.

Also, because rifles and shotguns are the firearms that are most readily available, they also figure prominently in workplace violence involving guns. In 1999, a devastating incident of workplace violence occurred right here in Ottawa at the OC Transpo bus yard on St. Laurent Blvd. Those murders were committed by a gunman with a high-powered hunting rifle.

Increasingly as we learn more about the challenges of maintaining healthy and safe workplaces, we are paying more attention to the importance of understanding the risk factors associated with both suicide and inter-personal violence. The risk factors for suicide and violence are closely linked – access to a firearm coupled with a personal crisis or job loss is a lethal combination. We need to promote more awareness of the real risks associated with any firearm in the hands of a depressed or stressed individual. And we need to ensure police, who are the first responders to these types of situations know as much about the situation as possible – including what kind of gun is involved.

Everyone on this Committee knows how useful the registry is to our nation's police forces and first responders. The registry provides police with vital knowledge of the number of guns and, more importantly the type of guns owned. That vital knowledge allows them to assess risk to themselves and to others, and remove guns from homes in situations where they and the public are at risk.

The growing confidence police forces have in the gun registry is reflected in quarterly RCMP reports that have shown increased use of the registry by police across the country. Indeed, those quarterly figures by the RCMP also showed gun owners are continuing to register their firearms –

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at the end of December 2009, over 6.7 million long guns and rifles were registered, making up 91% of all guns registered in Canada.

A billion dollar boondoggle

We cannot ignore the fact that mistakes were made when the registry was established. Those mistakes were amply documented by the Auditor General in 2002 and need not be revisited in this submission.

Most of the costs associated with setting up the registry were spent long ago and will never be recovered. The taxpayers of Canada will never get their money back.

The annual cost to maintain the registry today is cost effective for the job it does, and even more efficient given it no longer receives a revenue stream from license renewals. Most of the costs frequently associated with the registry by its opponents are in fact costs relating to licensing – including background criminal checks of applicants.

Over 7.4 million guns are registered to date with long guns and rifles representing 91% of registered firearms. A database that is consulted thousands of times a day by police across the country can no longer be dismissed by opponents as useless.

Effect of C-391 and current government policy

The vast majority of long guns are already registered. Gun owners in Canada are law-abiding citizens and the majority of them have registered their rifles and shotguns.

In 2006, and annually since, the federal government has declared an amnesty so that no charges are laid for failure to renew a license or register a gun. While the vast majority of gun owners continue to renew their licenses, the amnesty will over time reduce compliance and make the registry a less effective tool for police. Just imagine if there were no penalties for drunk driving.

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Private members business v. Government bill

C-391 is a private members bill in name only. It was referenced in the Speech from the Throne in March this year. Questions in the House about C-391 are answered not by the bill's sponsor – Candice Hooppner, but by the Minister of Public Safety. As recently as April 20th, 2010, the Minister responded in Question Period to a question concerning C391 asked by a government backbencher.

This government's desire to dismantle the gun registry seemed to even extend to holding back the 2008 Commissioner of Firearms Annual Report from public release until after November's second reading vote. According to a report in the Toronto Star, the annual report was submitted to the Minister's office on September 18, 2009. In an unusual turn of events, ministerial staff are reported to have questioned the content of the routine report. The report was apparently held by the Minister's staff until November 6, two days after Members of Parliament voted at second reading on Bill C-391.⁴ We can only speculate as to the motives of the Minister's staff in holding back release of the report until after the Members of this House voted on a piece of directly related legislation.

Conclusion

In 1995, as is the case today, a majority of Canadians favoured even stricter gun control legislation than the Firearms Act mandated.

In fact our own polling by Vector Research continues to show majority support by Canadians to abolish gun ownership outright. 54% of Canadians, in January 2010 favoured a ban on guns except for law enforcement.⁵

So in the uniquely Canadian spirit of compromise, the Firearms Act of 1995 struck a balance between the interests of those who favoured (and still favour) stricter controls and even abolition of gun ownership, and those who preferred less restrictions, and even an unrestricted environment around gun ownership.

4 "Tories sniped at firearm data", Toronto Star, February 22, 2010

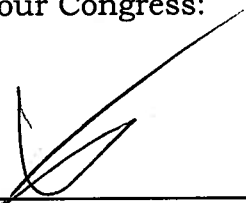
5 The Vector Poll on Public Opinion in Canada, January 2010

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Bill C-391 guts that balance. It would abolish the registry and even destroy the records currently held by the registry. It is a vital tool used by police to work safely and to keep our communities safe. It is a gun control measure that has helped reduce deaths by shotguns and rifles. It has helped reduce murders of women by shotguns and rifles.

Repealing the registry will eliminate the crucial data that keeps first responders safe, women safe, and the public safe. We urge the Committee to ensure the registry is maintained.

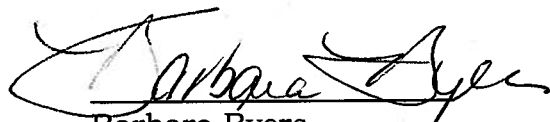
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