

Canada's 1995 Gun Control Legislation: Problems and Prospects

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At the same time that Canada is promoting stricter gun control in the UN, Canada's own gun control laws are an expensive failure. Introduced in 1995 with a promised net cost of two million dollars (Canadian), the nation's gun registry is now expected to cost at least a billion dollars, according to an authoritative report from Canada's Auditor General. The AG's report details pervasive malfeasance by the Liberal administration.

Auditor General's Report/Financial Scandals

Last December, Auditor General Sheila Fraser released a scathing report. "This is certainly the largest cost overrun we've ever seen in this office," she said (Auditor General, 2002). Two other studies of the registry in 2003 confirmed the disaster in the

Department of Justice. According to one report, there were “virtually no records” in government files related to the funding of many advertising contracts (Leblanc, 2002).

One reason for the spending disaster, although hardly the only one, was the government’s use of “back door financing” to avoid the requirement to report to Parliament. Secrecy bred unaccountability. One firm apparently billed the government twice for nearly identical reports -- at \$500,000 a pop (CBC, 2002). The same firm was paid \$330,000 for a communications strategy that was neither requested nor received (CTV, 2002). A high-ranking registry official spent more than \$200,000 commuting between Western Canada and Ottawa in just two years (Breitkreuz, June 25, 2003; Harris 2003). In fact, registry apparatchiks ran up \$13 million in travel expenses in only a few years (Naumetz, Jul 15, 2003). The RCMP is now investigating to determine if criminal charges should be laid concerning \$1.6 million in government contracts (Bowman and Ward, 2002). The minister responsible was suddenly appointed as ambassador to Denmark.

Sheila Fraser went easy on the government. Her report could have been a lot worse. Even though she was shocked at the

astronomical cost of the overrun, she didn't examine all of the expenditures. She had to stop when she couldn't get the documents she needed. The problem is far worse than she reported.

The firearms registry will end up costing Canadians at least three billion dollars, not just one billion.

An exasperated Auditor General complained that the registry audit was the first time her office had to discontinue an investigation because the government prevented the Auditor from obtaining the necessary information. “We stopped our audit when an initial review indicated that there were significant shortcomings in the information provided. We concluded that the information does not fairly represent the cost of the program to the government” (Auditor General, 2002).

The AG left out of her report the costs of the other governmental agencies that are working with the Department of Justice.

Ottawa is underwriting those bills too. We don't know what it's cost the RCMP or Customs and Immigration or the provinces and territories to administer the registry. Together these agencies have spent as much as the Justice Department itself.

Nor do these costs include enforcement costs. Estimates suggest that it would cost taxpayers another billion dollars to take even 10% of gun owners to court (Breitkrueez, Oct 21, 2003).

Now we are up to at least three billion.

Veteran Liberals, though, shrugged off the Auditor General's report. After all, these are the leaders who made a big show of taking a bus to their first day of work, in order to show their support of public transportation and cost-cutting. As soon as the crowd was gone, they hopped into the government-chauffeured limousines that were awaiting them out of sight of the cameras. Patrick Gossage, a veteran Liberal spinmeister, told the Ottawa Citizen that Auditor General reports never cause serious political problems: "We are inured to overruns on governmental programs."

Errors

It gets worse, the RCMP lacks confidence in the registry. The screening is so bad that the police are concerned that people

known to have violent records may have been issued firearm licences.

The firearms registry itself is full of errors. The Department of Justice stopped checking the data because that cost too much. This means the expensive registry is all but worthless. One imaginative Canadian even managed to register a soldering gun without anyone knowing that it wasn't a 'firearm' under the Canadian criminal code.

The government has promised to fix the problems identified by the AG. On February 21st, the Minister of Justice, after meeting with the Ministry's advisory group, the User Group on Firearms, announced an "Acton Plan" to deal with the troubled federal firearms program. Unfortunately, the Minister chose to ignore almost all of their recommendations and to appoint a new more "Liberal-friendly" Advisory Committee (Breitkreuz, July 31, 2003).

Data theft from registry offices – most recently in Edmonton – is a bonanza for terrorist and other criminals seeking to create fake identities (RCMP September 1, 2003). A computer crash recently lost thousands of owner's records.

Supporters of the registry argue that the overrun was not that bad for such a good program (Naumetz, Dec 11, 2002).

Unfortunately for anybody taking this tack, there are no actual successes to tout. Not one crime has been solved by the registry. Violent crime has not declined since this legislation was brought in. Spousal homicide in Canada has even increased. Canadian large cities are suffering an unprecedented wave of gang murders (Bolan, 2002; Jenkins, 2003; Pynn, 2003).

CDN vs US crime trends

The real success of the Canadian registry is not in reducing crime, but as a culture war against traditional Canada. The Liberal government exploited the anger of “women’s” groups to gain political advantage by playing urban dwellers against rural Canada, immigrants against traditional Canadians, and men against women.

The Liberals needed a way to counter a perceived “drift to the right” on economic policy. Thus, they took a strong position on a

symbolic issue -- gun control -- that appealed to urban supporters. Moreover, universal firearm registration would create a large number of jobs.¹ Thus, the Liberals could simultaneously pose as fiscal conservatives and expand the Ottawa bureaucracy.

Perhaps more importantly, Allan Rock, then Justice Minister, was looking for an issue to ignite his drive to become PM himself (Fife 1993, 1997; Fisher 1994).

Unfortunately for the Liberals, the firearm registry has become emblematic of the Liberal government's corruption and irresponsible management. These issues will be central to the federal election anticipated in 2004.

Grassroots Canadians are not complying with the law. Only five million long guns have been registered so far out of the estimated 12 - 13 million in private hands in Canada (Mauser, 2001).

¹At the same time that over 44,000 public sector jobs were lost in Ottawa, the number of employees in the Canadian Justice Department actually increased (Government of Canada, 1993 budget).

No more than half of all gun owners have gotten a firearms licence. (Mauser, 2001). Estimates of non-participation rates among Aboriginal Canadians is much lower -- around 10% (Breitkreuz, August 7, 2003; Naumetz, Jul. 23, 2003). One band in BC has even decided, in defiance of Ottawa, to issue its own firearm licences (News Services, 2003).

Conclusions

The gun registry is a waste of taxpayer's money. It's not contributing to a safer society. It's too expensive and it's not helping to reduce crime.

Maybe Canadians would be safer if the two billion dollars spent so far had been spent going after violent criminals instead of hunters. While the government makes inaccurate lists of who owns which gun, the Correctional Service lacks the funds to track parolees who fail to report. Immigration Canada cannot afford to keep track of 36,000 violent offenders who have been ordered deported.

In Canada, registered gun owners must report a change of address to the police, but convicted violent felons do not. The Liberal government is afraid to violate the privacy rights of child molesters or people with restraining orders or those who have had their firearm privileges revoked (Breitkreuz, May 9, 2003).

The Canadian Coast Guard says it can't defend our shores against terrorists. Customs says it needs more money to catch smugglers. The Correctional Service hasn't got enough money to track parolees who fail to report.

The money spent on the registry could have bought better health care for many tens of thousands of Canadians stuck in Canada's ailing health care system. The money could have brought modern clean water and sanitary sewage systems to 45 First Nations reserves (that's Canadian for "Indian reservation").

These are government programs where a few billion dollars really might save lives.

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