

BC Hunter and Shooter, Summer 2001

GUN TALK

By Gary Mauser

On A Slippery Slope In Canada

"I came to Ottawa with the firm belief that the only people in this country who should have guns are police officers and soldiers."

-- Allan Rock, Former Canadian Minister of Justice
Maclean's "Taking Aim on Guns", April 25, 1994.

By 2003, all firearms in Canada must be registered for the first time. Proponents of universal firearm registration promise that registration will encourage greater responsibility among owners and provide police with better methods of tracing lost or stolen firearms. Opponents argue that such a scheme is unworkable, and, at best, would just create another costly bureaucracy. The recent introduction of a licencing scheme for gun owners gives a taste of the kind of problems firearm registration will run into when it is introduced. At worst, firearm registration is another step along a slippery slope that will destroy individual freedom for all Canadians.

Universal firearm registration is part of Bill C-68, which was a massive revision of Canada's firearm laws passed in 1995. Handguns have been registered since 1934, but long guns, which represent the bulk of all firearms in Canada, have never been registered before. The government has decided to proceed in stages. Since January 1, 2001, anyone who wishes to keep a firearm he or she already owns must have a licence. In two more years, owners will be required to register their firearms.

Escalating Costs

In 1995, when firearm registration was before Parliament, the federal government promised that it would cost no more than \$85 million over five years. Although few firearms have been registered to date, the cost of setting up the firearm registration bureaucracy has already passed \$600 million and the total is expected to reach one billion in 2001. Other governmental priorities have languished while costs have skyrocketed for firearm registration. RCMP salaries were frozen for most of the 1990s, while the number of employees working on firearm registration grew from under 100 in 1995 to over 1,700 in 2000. The total number of RCMP officers has declined per capita nationwide by over 10 per cent since 1975. This means there is a short fall of over 500 RCMP officers in BC alone.

According to the father of modern policing, Sir Robert Peel, the police must have the support of "the policed" for laws to be enforced effectively. Experience in England, Australia, New Zealand and the United States shows that non-compliance with firearm registration is widespread.

Surveys show that many Canadian gun owners will refuse to register. This percentage has increased since the law was passed. In 1995, 72 per cent said they'd comply. In 1997, only 58 per cent said they would. The rejection of firearm registration by "the policed"

necessarily accelerates the tendency towards a militarization of the police. This will **alienate the typical citizen even further from the police.**

Subject To Jail Term

Anticipating problems, the government claims that many owners have gotten rid of their firearms. In 1998, the government estimated there were 3.3 million gun owners in Canada. However, a survey carried out by myself and Taylor Buckner (*Canadian Attitudes Toward Gun Control: The Real Story*) for the Mackenzie Institute in 1997 pegged this number at around 4.5 million. In January 2001, the government's Canadian Firearms Centre estimated there now were only 2.4 million owners. This drop suggests that about one million people got rid of all of their guns and that at least one million guns must have been sold or turned in to the RCMP. Yet, records show that far fewer firearms than this were sold or turned in for destruction over the past few years. Apparently, many gun owners have quietly kept their guns without getting the necessary licence. They are now subject to five years in jail.

The debate over firearm registration has caused deep divisions in police ranks. Although the chiefs of police support this legislation, surveys of serving police officers show that most other ranks do not.

Public Support Waning

Polls find over 80 per cent of respondents support registering firearms. But public opinion begins to shift as soon as people realize that it will cost them --- as taxpayers -- serious money or that it will divert governmental resources from more desirable programs. Support drops to 50 per cent when respondents are told that it might cost \$500 million to register firearms; dropping further to around 40 per cent when the trade off is a reduction in the number of police officers.

Firearm registration has also had a significant impact on Canadian politics. Five provinces have held general elections since 1995. Firearm registration was an issue in every one of them; no party supporting firearm registration managed to get elected. Furthermore, in last year's federal election, opposition to firearm registration was an important reason that the Liberals were all but shut out in Western Canada by the Canadian Alliance.

Slippery Slope

In Canada, as in the US, gun laws are usually passed during periods of public hysteria. After the threat recedes, individual rights and freedoms remain diminished. Firearm owners serve as a convenient "devil" for the government to justify passing new legislation. A frightened public supports new restrictions on their individual freedom because the government claims it needs more power to deal with the threat.

During the 1930s, handguns were the first to be registered when the Canadian government feared labor unrest as well as American "rum runners." There were separate permits for "British subjects" and for "aliens." Subsequently, during World War II, firearms were confiscated from all Orientals, even Chinese Canadians. Throughout the

war, China remained a strong ally of Canada and the United States in their efforts to defeat Imperial Japan.

In 1977, after a shooting tragedy in Toronto, a police permit was introduced for acquiring rifles and shotguns. The protection of property was eliminated as a suitable reason for acquiring a handgun. Now, police routinely refuse to issue a firearm permit to anyone who indicates they desire a firearm for self-protection. **(Surveys show that tens of thousands of Canadians still use firearms to defend themselves every year).**

In 1991, after a shooting tragedy in Montreal sparked a nationwide campaign that demonized "gun owners," the government introduced restrictions on semi-automatic firearms and stiffened requirements for buying firearms.

In 1995, Bill C-68 was rammed through Parliament over the protests of three of the four opposition parties. Small and short-barreled handguns were banned on the grounds that they could be easily concealed. Presumably, larger handguns are less dangerous. In addition to prohibiting and confiscating over half of all registered handguns, Bill C-68 also:

- Significantly relaxes parliamentary oversight of the process of prohibiting weapons through order-in-council, allowing gun bans without the need for Parliamentary approval;
- Broadens the police powers of "search and seizure" and expands the types of officials who can make use of such powers, allowing the police to enter homes without search warrants to "inspect" gun storage and look for unregistered guns;
- Requires applicants to disclose detailed medical and financial information;
- Requires suspected gun owners to testify against themselves;
- Introduces a licence to possess firearms and to buy ammunition;
- Requires the registration of all firearms, including shotguns and rifles.

Immediately after the federal election last November, the government decided to classify many popular BB and pellet guns as firearms; some even became restricted or prohibited weapons. No public announcements of these changes were ever made, so many Canadians are now subject to criminal penalties of up to 10 years in jail without knowing it.

The history of gun control in Canada demonstrates the "slippery slope" of accepting even the most benign appearing gun control measures. At each stage, the government has demonized a target group, and moved to restrict access to firearms and to increase government powers. Firearm registration damages traditional Canadian liberties and freedoms, while it protects criminals by keeping police off the street. Is this what we want?

Gary Mauser is a Professor at Simon Fraser University in the Institute for Canadian Urban Research Studies and the Faculty of Business Administration. He has conducted numerous studies of firearm legislation. *His overview in this issue is intended as a synopsis of the situation in Canada today and is based on an article he prepared and submitted to the Fraser Institute for the Fraser Forum. In future issues he will be addressing specific aspects of Canada's gun registration scheme.*