

Disaster Up North

Gun-control laws run amuck.

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Effusively praised by President Clinton, Canada's gun-control laws are in a state of crisis, threatening the political future of many Liberal party politicians. Introduced in 1995 with a promised net cost of \$2 million dollars (Canadian), the nation's gun registry is going to cost over a billion dollars, according to a new report from the auditor general. The report details pervasive malfeasance by the Liberal administration. Now, many Canadians who have no personal interest in gun ownership are turning against the deceit and self-dealing of the Liberals.

On December 3, Auditor General Sheila Fraser released a scathing report <http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/reports.nsf/html/02menu_e.html> . "This is certainly the largest cost overrun we've ever seen in this office," she said. Commentators are calling the registry "the billion dollar boondoggle."

One reason for the spending disaster, although hardly the only one, was lavish government spending on politically connected public-relations firms to promote the gun registry and other projects. One PR executive billed the government for 3,673 hours of work in one year ~ a figure that even an associate at a New York City corporate-law sweatshop would find implausible. A criminal inquiry is under way.

A few days after the auditor's report was released, a routine request for additional funding of \$72 million for the firearm registry fortuitously came before the House of Commons. In an unprecedented move, the government was forced to withdraw the request when numerous Liberal backbenchers, criticizing their own government, threatened to vote no. Critics pointed out that the government was lying in its claim that the appropriation was money that had already been budgeted, rather than a supplemental appropriation. If the government had not backed down, the Liberal leadership might have lost the vote, which would have forced an election.

This rebellion from the Liberal backbench is extraordinary in the Canadian context. Canadian MPs have much less freedom than do their peers in other parliamentary

systems, for a Canadian MP can be easily removed by his party's leadership if he steps out of line. The Liberal MPs' defiance of Liberal Prime Minister Chrétien suggests that they no longer fear him or his cabinet.

MP Garry Breitkreuz <<http://www.garrybreitkreuz.com>> , a member of the Canadian Alliance party, has been critiquing the registry and its failures since 1993. So it was not surprising when he declared that the government should end the registry before more money is lost: "How can you keep a program going without money? If you withdraw money for it, that means you don't have confidence in the registry. The registry should be scrapped."

Joe Clark, leader of the Progressive Conservative party, had in 1979 been elected prime minister by running against PM Pierre Trudeau's gun controls. Trudeau had introduced central registration for a limited class of guns, "restricted weapons" such as handguns and machine guns, while promising that universal gun registration would never be imposed. Clark's inept government was swept out of office in 1980, leaving Trudeau's controls intact. Since then, the PCs have waffled on guns, but they are now solidly opposed to the gun registry, having seen how unpopular it has become. So it was not surprising that Clark asked for the resignation of Interior minister Allan Rock, since Rock had been the Justice minister (1995-97) who pushed registration through parliament, while declaring "The only people in this country who should have guns are police officers and soldiers."

Likewise, there were PC calls for the resignation of Health minister Anne McLellen, who had been Justice minister from 1997 till last January, during most of the period of cost over-runs.

But it was shocking that Liberal backbenchers Benoît Serré (Timiskaming-Cochrane, in northern Ontario) and Alex Shepherd (Durham, Ontario) demanded Rock's resignation. While pushing registration through parliament, Rock had promised to end the program if costs exceeded \$150 million.

Chrétien has said that he wants to hold office until the next party-leadership convention, in November, but pressure from within the party is building for him to leave much sooner.

The events in the Commons followed another setback for Chrétien in the normally placid Canadian Senate. Canadian senators are appointed by the prime minister. So, they predictably support the governing party. They are usually about as supine as the decrepit House of Lords in England.

Yet on November 26, the Liberal-dominated senate took the rare step of voting to split a bill on the Criminal Code. Provisions amending the Firearms Act were divided from a comprehensive animal-welfare proposal. This may sound innocuous, but it is an amazingly bold move for the senate to make. Splitting the bill means delaying its passage through the senate, which may lead to the senate's actually voting down one of the two new bills. The last time the senate even tried to split a bill was in 1988, and the effort

failed that time. On December 9, the Commons, amazingly, acquiesced to the Senate's action.

Martin Cauchon, the current justice minister, vowed that the government would continue with firearm registration, which even includes most air guns. Canada's experiment to register all firearms in the country had been scheduled to be fully implemented by January 1, 2003. Except for a brief period during World War II, rifles and shotguns have never been registered, and neither have air guns.

Canadians tolerate more onerous gun laws than Americans. Handguns have been registered since 1934. (11,000 registered handgun owners are currently missing from that system, and the non-compliance rate may be over 50%.) Canadians have far fewer handguns per capita than do Americans. But hunting is almost as popular in Canada as in the U.S. Between 20 and 35 percent of households in Canada have at least one rifle or shotgun, and others have air guns.

A close reading of the auditor general's report shows that the problems in the firearm registry are even worse than the extra billion dollars. Auditor general Fraser complained that the registry audit was the first time her office had had to discontinue an audit because the government prevented the auditor from obtaining the necessary information.

The auditor general was appalled not only by the "astronomical cost overruns," but also by the flaws in the system that made it impossible for her to know the real costs. "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."

The damning report did not even include the costs of the other governmental agencies that are working with the Department of Justice to implement firearm registration. Together these cooperating agencies have spent almost as much as Justice on registration. The federal government has been underwriting the costs of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Indian Affairs, Citizenship and Immigration, the attorney general, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner, and the provincial and territorial governments. If all these costs are considered, the total cost will soon top two billion dollars.

The expenses would have been even higher, if it were not for massive disobedience of the retroactive registration law. Only five million long guns have been registered so far. Estimates of the actual gun supply range from 7.7 million (the government's preferred but implausible number) to over 25 million rifles and shotguns in Canada, plus an unknown number of air guns.

Sheila Fraser saved her strongest criticism for the way the government deliberately misled parliament: "The issue here is not gun control. And it's not even astronomical cost overruns, although those are serious. What's really inexcusable is that Parliament was in the dark." The government knew about the mismanagement problems in the firearm

registry years ago, but stonewalled questions from MPs such as Garry Breitkreuz, whose requests for financial information were refused on the grounds of "cabinet secrecy."

The *National Post*, one of the main daily newspapers in Canada, opined that that the firearm registry was typical of this Liberal government. Chrétien's cronies have been caught wasting billions in one ministry or another almost ever year since the last election. The *Post* summed it up by saying, "The latest audit extends a catalogue of Liberal arrogance, incompetence and profligacy that beggars belief. Unfortunately, it is also gradually beggaring the country."

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 manifest their support for public transportation and cost cutting. As soon as the crowd was gone, they hopped into the government-chauffeured limousines which awaited them.

Prime Minister Chrétien said, "Yes, there were cost overruns. It was more than we expected, but the system is in place and it's a good system, and it's good for Canadian citizens." 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." There is some support for his cynicism. Each year the auditor general announces scandalous waste in one department or another of the Liberal government, and the media and the voters get upset for a day, and then move on.

Costs aside, the registry is a mess. Millions of registry entries are incomplete or incorrect. There is a backlog of over 130,000 guns for which registration forms have been filed, but which have not been entered into computer databases and for which no registration certificate has been issued. Over 30,000 guns have been backlogged for more than a year. Data theft from registry offices ~ most recently in Edmonton ~ is a bonanza for terrorist and other criminals seeking to create fake identities.

Supporters of the registry argue that the overrun was not that bad for such a good program. Unfortunately for anybody taking this tack, there are no actual successes to tout. Not one crime has been solved by the registry. Allan Rock claims that the registry has saved 1,240 lives a year, but nonpartisan Canadian criminologists such as Philip Stenning and Matthew Yeager scoff at this assertion. (Stenning teaches at the University of Toronto's Centre of Criminology. Yeager is a consulting criminologist who once served as staff researcher for the U.S. Conference of Mayors' campaign to promote gun control.) Firearms suicide has declined, but has been replaced by other methods.

While the homicide rate in Canada has been gradually declining since the early 1990s, before the gun registry law was introduced, criminologists believe this is probably due to the aging Canadian population. The percentage of homicides involving handguns has doubled in the same time period, as have gang-related homicides. Overall firearms homicides have risen 15 percent in the last five years. Toronto is suffering an unprecedented wave of gang murders.

Gun prohibitionists shrug off rising problems with gang violence, saying that this legislation was targeted at normal people who misuse firearms, not criminals. But in fact, spousal homicides, which had also been slowly declining, suddenly jumped in 2001. The spousal homicide rate is now higher than it was when the firearm registry was introduced in 1997.

The real success of the Canadian registry is not seen in reducing crime, but in fueling a culture war against men. The Coalition for Gun Control (the Canadian gun-prohibition lobby) views reducing gun ownership as a good in itself. The government, along with its coterie of "women's" groups, takes the misanthropic view that gun ownership is emblematic of male values that must be destroyed in the new Canada.

These groups maintain a very public obsession with the December 6, 1989, murder of 14 female engineering students at the École Polytechnique in Montreal by a man with a Ruger Mini-14 rifle. The killer had been licensed as a gun owner under existing gun laws. The Montreal Coroner's Office concluded that the particular gun type played no role in the crime, since just as many victims could have been killed with almost any hunting rifle. The coroner reported that the police and emergency-dispatch response was utterly inept, as police and operators argued about whether the call should have been directly transmitted to the police. The police were not told which building to go to, and they did not enter the building until 8 minutes after the murderer had killed himself, still having 60 rounds of unused ammunition.

This vicious act of one man has, ever since, been touted by the misanthropes as a reason to crack down on all men, especially men who own guns, which many self-proclaimed feminists find "revolting." Obviously, if the killer's gun had been on a government list, the killings would still have taken place. Yet the gun registry is defended as a memorial to the Montreal victims.

Because Canada's gun-licensing system is already quite strict, with a host of new controls introduced by the Progressive Conservative government after the Montreal massacre, the extra benefit of the registry (keeping track of precisely which rifles and shotguns a licensed person possesses) is virtually nil.

Chrétien touts gun registration as the foundation of a "culture of safety," but the results are just the opposite. The Ontario Police Association opined that the money should have been spent to put more police on the streets. Indeed, the registry money could have put a thousand more police on the streets for a decade. Ontario's Public Safety minister argued that the money should have been used to go after handgun criminals on the urban streets, rather than "the farm widow who has a shotgun in the attic."

Twenty-five thousand supporters of the Law-abiding Unregistered Firearms Association have publicly declared their refusal to register. Although the national government has told provincial police to start hunting down unregistered gun owners on January 1, 2003, the provincial police departments of Ontario, Edmonton, and Alberta have announced

that they plan to put no effort into looking for gun-owners who have not registered, because there are more serious crimes to address.

In Canada, registered gun owners must report a change of address to the police, but convicted violent felons do not. Registered gun owners must surrender their privacy, consenting to government "inspections" of their home to verify registry information. While the government makes inaccurate lists of who owns which gun, the Correctional Service lacks the funds to track parolees who fail to report.

Chrétien's dilatory attitude towards violent criminals and his fierce attitude towards gun owners mimic his policy toward terrorism. While he refuses to restrict terrorist-fundraising operations in Canada, he has used terrorism as a pretext to expand government surveillance of all ordinary Canadians. His Customs and Revenue Agency wants to build a new government database to record all foreign travel of Canadians ~ even what they eat on the airplane. He is also pushing a biometric national ID card, which would require every Canadian to submit to a retina scan and fingerprinting. If security is really the issue, the money spent on the gun registry should have gone to the Coast Guard, which recently announced that it cannot defend Canada's shores against terrorists.

Alternatively, putting the money into Canada's puny military, whose pilots must fly 40-year-old helicopters, might truly promote a "culture of safety."

Not to mention the four thousand new women's shelters that could have been set up with the registry money. It says a lot about the so-called "women's groups" that they pull for a gun registry, rather than for more effective use of government resources. The groups certainly do not speak for women like writer Claire Joly, who advocates fighting back against violent criminals, rather than persecuting men.

The money spent on the registry could also have bought hundreds of new MRI machines, or paid thousands of nurses, or provided home care for many tens of thousands 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").

Polls have show that a majority of Canadians, like Americans, support gun registration in the abstract. But when the public is presented with cost figures and trade-offs, support declines precipitously.

If Chrétien and his ministers were officers of an American corporation, they would be easy prosecution targets. Having obstructed the first audit, the prime minister now claims to support everything the audit says; but he has ordered a second audit, by KPMG, to be completed next year. A skeptical Parliamentary Committee, though, has announced that it will conduct its own investigation. Meanwhile, cabinet ministers attempt to deflect public questions from angry MPs by criticizing America, and offering inanities such as pointing out that Charlton Heston really was not Moses, but just played him in a movie.

It's not working. Even columnists who dislike guns, such as Margaret Wente of the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, are describing the Liberal response as the "despicable defence of the indefensible." The scandal is entering its second week as newspapers, many of them committed to gun control in general, furiously denounce the Liberals and the registry.

Pundits agree that Allan Rock's plan to be the next prime minister is finished. In previous elections, the gun registry cost the Liberals many seats in the maritime and prairie provinces. In the next Canadian elections, the people may vote for a non-Liberal government which will toss the registry on the ash heap of discarded programs, while retaining most of the rest of Canada's strict gun-control laws.

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