

Government Orders

As for the amendment, the Reform Party has given the Minister of Justice and the House an historic opportunity. It gives all members of Parliament the choice to stand together and to show Canadians our common commitment to fighting crime. Despite our political differences we share a desire to get tough on criminals. Together we can quickly pass strong anti-crime legislation.

The amendment will also provide us all with the chance to focus at a later date on the one issue that divides us and threatens this entire package. That issue is the firearms registry. The use of a registry in firearm ownership is a radical departure from Canadian tradition and one which should be carefully examined.

In light of the experiences of countries such as England, Australia and New Zealand we are very much afraid this is a lost cause before it even gets started. Two years ago the Auditor General made this statement on the topic of Canada's gun control policy. He said: "Evaluation of the [gun control] program is essential to give the Canadian public and members of Parliament the assurance that its objectives are being met".

Clearly the gun registry has not undergone the sort of significant, non-partisan evaluation needed to contribute to the debate. Until this happens there will be ongoing divisions within the House over the registry, slowing up the positive aspects of Bill C-68 in the process. If this is the only issue that seriously divides us as parliamentarians, let us deal with it separately. Let us deal with it in the best interests of all Canadians.

In closing, as members of Parliament we have long hoped for the day when we can come together in a spirit of co-operation and common direction in the interests of our constituents. By adopting the Reform amendment the House can, even on this one issue, work in unison for the betterment of all Canadians. Let us not let what divides us hold back what unites us.

Mr. Réginald Bélair (Cochrane—Superior, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when the gun control issue heated up last year after a string of gun-related crimes, culminating in the fatal shooting at the Just Desserts restaurant in Toronto, emotion ran so high that it was very difficult in the confusion to properly dissociate the weapon of the crime from the underlying and growing issue of violence in our society.

Responsibility for these crimes was quickly linked to the availability of firearms and to every firearms owner. Under the proposed gun and crime control bill a very high number of my constituents understand the fact that responsibility for crimes involving firearms is being unfairly attributed to the law-abiding gun owner on the same basis as the criminals.

• (1610)

[*Translation*]

The government is right to introduce legislation containing tougher sanctions against individuals convicted of murder and to step up efforts to deal with the smuggling of firearms. Such measures are necessary if we want to control crime and prevent an increase in the crime rate. We must ensure compliance with existing legislation on the wrongful use of firearms and their proliferation in our society. However, I have serious reservations about some of the points proposed in the bill.

[*English*]

In my riding, being a rural one, almost everyone owns a rifle or a shotgun, yet the incidence of violent crimes involving firearms is practically non-existent. They are responsible and law-abiding citizens including natives, trappers, sustenance and sports hunters, gun club members and gun collectors that have all proven their ability to own and use a firearm. Stricter gun control will not necessarily result in a decrease in the number of crimes involving firearms in this rural part of Canada. These law-abiding firearm owners should not be burdened or inconvenienced with additional gun control measures that will not reduce crime or improve public safety.

[*Translation*]

Self-respecting firearms owners will not willingly accept a further erosion of their right to privacy. They are afraid that when the data base is complete, it may provide, on request, information on their financial situation, marital status, mental health and mobility, all because of regulations that may profoundly intrude on their privacy, and at their own expense.

[*English*]

My constituents have been asking all along that the bill be divided into two parts: legislation that directly affects law-abiding gun owners and legislation that affects the criminal use of firearms. They have, as I have, also requested a free vote on the issue. We know that this will not be the case and therein lies my dilemma. I am wrenched between the loyalty to my party and representation of the views of my constituents. It will not be an easy call.

Eighty-five million dollars was forecast by the government to implement the national firearms registration system. The federal government has pegged the number of guns in circulation to be registered at 7.5 million. This number differs by a wide margin with the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters calculations of 15 million as well as with those of the National Firearms Association. That is why the projection is unrealistic while I find the cost still prohibitive.