

*Government Orders*

concerns I feel my party should address in a parliamentary committee.

I was somewhat surprised with the type of debate that took place in this House around the gun control issue. I heard some speakers mention individual freedoms. Some spoke of the right for every Canadian citizen to own firearms. Others perceived the proposed measures as unjustified government interference in people's private lives.

To some extent, we are having a societal debate here. Many representations were made and many letters were sent to my office by Canadian citizens who oppose this legislation. I read almost all of them to have a good idea of what the problem is.

I think that this debate is about looking at society differently. It is a matter of individual freedom against public interest. No one in Canada, I think, opposes the right of the government to control firearms, to ensure that anyone who owns weapons, handguns in particular, be identified and be required to justify requesting permission to own such weapons. The problem right now is with the registration of firearms which are hunting weapons.

Some say: "I am an honest citizen and I am not going to cause problems for others with my firearms. Consequently, I do not see why the government wants to know if I own such firearms and determine whether I am allowed to do so". Those who use that argument forget something important, namely that our society—we are not talking here about American society in the 19th century, but about society in Canada and Quebec in 1995—has changed. Customs have changed, as well as the concept of community life, and I believe that one of the main thrusts right now is that society is opposed to violence.

Society is opposed to violence against women and children. Actions which were condoned 25 or 30 years ago are now being denounced and can trigger criminal proceedings. Society tells us, legislators, to control violence. If violence can sometimes show itself in such brutal and damaging ways, it is because some people are armed. It goes without saying that the vast majority, maybe 99 per cent, of those who own firearms will not commit violent crimes. This control which we want to implement over firearms may deter only a small number of people from misusing their firearms, or from using them with bad intentions.

But I want to make it clear that, in my opinion, this bill is a message. It is a message which society is sending to itself. It is society which no longer wants to live in a climate of violence, which wants peace and safe streets, and which wants to make sure that, if a neighbour, a person across the street or those people whom one meets in one's daily activities are armed, they will have had to state that they own firearms.

• (1210)

Owning a gun does not necessarily mean a person is violent, but society tells us that it wants to know who has guns, so that the message is clear. To own a gun is, in a way, a right, but there is also a duty involved. Guns must be used carefully, so that no one is ever at risk.

That being said, I think it is important to adopt the kind of bill before us today, even if it means curtailing certain individual freedoms. I think that, to a certain extent, society is ready for this bill.

Some aspects of the bill are not entirely satisfactory, however. Before my time expires, I would like to comment on these aspects. There is the matter of prison sentences. The bill provides for a minimum prison sentence of four years for serious crimes committed with firearms. The bill also contains several provisions that would increase prison sentences for individuals convicted of contravening this legislation, once it is passed.

I question the use of prison sentences and their effectiveness. The other day, I read in the paper that Canada ranks third among a number of western countries for the number of persons incarcerated per population of 100,000. Countries like Germany, France or the Netherlands have incarceration rates that are lower than Canada's. There is no indication, however, in the newspapers or in reports on the subject, that in these countries violence has greater impact or that people are not as safe as in other countries where incarceration is the measure of choice to control crime.

Incidentally, the two countries where incarceration is used most often are Russia and the United States. The United States has opted for incarceration as a way of exercising social control, as a way of controlling crime. If we look at what is happening in the United States, we do not get the impression that American society is less violent or less dangerous than German or French society.

I think that incarceration is not the right way to deal with the crime rate, and that is why I question some provisions of the bill that seem to reflect this emphasis on the deterrent effect of more severe prison sentences. There may be other ways to approach this problem. This is a very complex issue, and I think my party should raise it in committee.

There is also the matter of sentencing. It is said that judges do not have enough leeway. The minimum sentence is too high to allow sufficiently for the circumstances involved. I think judges should be allowed greater flexibility in setting the minimum sentence. Obviously, when a crime is committed with a firearm, this is an aggravating circumstance. However, there are situations where a judge may have to penalize individuals because under the law, he must determine a minimum period of incarceration. This does not mean justice will necessarily be served in every case.