

Government Orders

The people who will pay for the registration system and the licensing system will be the gun owners, just like those of us who own automobiles have to pay for the registration system and the licensing system. The general taxpayer should not have to pay for the gun control system. It should be paid for by the people who own and use guns, and rightly so. The moneys we would use for general social programs to attack the causes of crime will come out of general tax revenue. They should not be played one against the other.

Mrs. Jean Payne (St. John's West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak on Bill C-68, an act respecting firearms and other weapons.

I congratulate the Minister of Justice on his efforts and perseverance in bringing this important and timely matter to the House of Commons. More important, I commend the minister for his willingness to listen and to respond to the comments of all Canadians regarding the bill without sacrificing the major goals and initiatives of it.

I do not believe any other bill in this session has generated as much discussion and debate among Canadians as has this one. However, as I have listened to the discussion and the debate some of the major aspects of the legislation are being overlooked. I will comment on some of the issues I feel have not been adequately highlighted.

The legislation sends a clear message to criminals, judges and the public. If a person uses a gun while committing a crime they will be punished. The Criminal Code will be amended to provide that when a person has committed one of the ten listed serious crimes with a firearm they will be subject to a minimum sentence of four years in prison. In many cases the actual punishment will be more severe. If a person uses a gun in the commission of a crime they will be punished. No matter what other mitigating factors are involved, a judge will have no choice but to sentence people guilty of these offences to four years in a federal penitentiary.

The message is clear. The protection of the public must be the main goal of our penal system. In addition, people convicted of these offences will be banned from owning a firearm for life. I believe it is important to reflect on these provisions because they highlight the central goal and purpose of the legislation, to ensure Canada remains a safe place and that Canadians continue to enjoy protection from gun related crime.

The provision aimed at tighter border controls was referred to earlier by my hon. colleague with respect to the importation of firearms. One need only look to the south to see the dangers guns pose. It is with great pride that many Canadians compare the relative safety of our cities and towns to those of the United States. Given the easy availability of firearms in the United States it is clear any legislation aimed at controlling the use of guns must address the importation of guns.

Import-export controls for firearms are presently based on the premise that guns are a commodity and therefore are subject to the same trade controls as any other commodity. Under Bill C-68 changes will be made to provide for a fundamental reorientation of the policy toward firearm imports. In particular, the legislation will recognize that importing firearms may have important consequences in terms of public safety and crime control.

Under Bill C-68 for every firearm coming into Canada the person responsible will be required to have either an import permit for commercial use or a customs declaration for personal use. Every gun coming into Canada will now be tracked. These import declarations and permits will only be issued to those individuals and companies who have the necessary permission to possess firearms while in Canada. These controls form part of the bill's effort to reduce the underground market for guns and provide for the accurate tracking of all guns in Canada.

• (1630)

Of course, in conjunction with these new measures, the act provides also for penalties for those individuals who do not obey the import guidelines. Under Bill C-68, the Criminal Code will be amended to provide for a new offence of importing a firearm without the proper customs declaration or permit. This offence will be punishable by a minimum of one year imprisonment if prosecuted on indictment. In addition, the court has the power to prohibit the offender from possessing a firearm for up to 10 years.

Again, the theme underlying Bill C-68 is clear in these provisions. The theme is the protection of the public and the reduction of crime.

The bill also recognizes the legitimate use of guns, but at the same time it is aimed at limiting the use of guns by those people who have no legitimate purpose to do so. This will be done by reducing the underground market for guns, the place where criminals get their guns, and by increasing the penalties for those who use guns for illegitimate purposes.

There are other measures which I would like to briefly highlight. Any future sale or importation of handguns that have a barrel length of 105 millimetres or less will be banned. In addition, the definition of firearm in section 85 of the Criminal Code will be expanded to include imitation firearms so that those who simply use or threaten with a fake gun will not escape the penalties under the Criminal Code.

I would now like to take a few moments to comment on the section of the bill that has by far generated the most public debate, the system of universal gun registration. In my conversations, letters and meetings with constituents, it is this section of the bill that has been the focus of much discussion. Before understanding the purpose of universal gun registration, one must be cognizant of the other initiatives contained in Bill C-68 which I have previously touched upon. I repeat, Bill C-68