

● (1410)

I will support any firearms control legislation which is reasonable and enforceable. As one who has owned a rifle and a shotgun for well over 30 years, in addition to having them trained in the air force and in the army in the use of Sten guns, Bren guns, .50 calibre machine-guns, Lee-Enfield rifles, and so forth, I think I can speak with some knowledge and experience on the subject. I said I will support any firearms control legislation which is sensible, reasonable and enforceable. I feel that owners of what are called long guns—rifles or shotguns—or any firearms under this legislation in most cases feel individual responsibility for the care, handling, safe-keeping and use of those firearms; and so they should. It seems to me that any potential liability of the firearm's owner has always been there.

I feel that having to obtain a licence to own a firearm will increase the sense of individual responsibility which each firearm owner already has, or should have. I also feel that the liability part should be limited so that the licensed firearm owner who has taken reasonable care and precautions will not be subject to liability if someone else misuses his firearm.

I think that in some ways licensing owners of firearms will help reduce the accessibility and availability of firearms to those who are either unfit or unable to own or use one. I am thinking not only of the criminal element, but also of children who in too many tragic instances have been wounded or killed because of firearms which were not safely stored and for which reasonable precautions were not taken. Too many tragedies occur in this way every year. There was a tragedy in Regina just last year. A careless and irresponsible firearm owner left a loaded shotgun in a room in a house. Two children ended up playing with it, and one blew the other in half. If the licensing provision will increase the sense of responsibility each of us should have in any case, then it is a step in the right direction.

With regard to reasonable precautions and safeguards, the overwhelming majority of firearms owners already keep their weapons in a safe condition. They do not leave them loaded in their houses. In fact, many have their rifles stored, or a rifle hanging on the wall has the bolt removed; it is locked away in some other place and the ammunition is also kept separate. If anyone were to steal the firearm or start playing with it, it would not be capable of being fired. So if a licence to own a firearm requires reasonable safeguards, we will have made a good move toward reducing the horrifying number of deaths and woundings, whether deliberate or accidental, which occur every year in this country.

There has been much talk about two people being required to endorse or to recommend a person in a firearm's licence application. I agree with that provision. I have hunted with many people since I was 15 years of age and, quite frankly, there are probably half a dozen individuals who are friends of mine and with whom I have gone hunting once or twice but with whom I will never go again. In no way would I endorse their licence applications if they were to ask me, because they are not fit to own a firearm. I would treat that matter in the same as I would an oath, an affidavit, a passport application or on any

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document where one's name and signature signifies his word, his honesty and his desire to abide by the law. I, and I think most citizens, regard endorsement as a serious matter. I do not think many people would endorse lightly an application for a licence for a firearm.

There should be a large number of licence issuers. For example, officers of gun clubs, whether they be collectors, sports shooters, target shooters, antique gun collectors or whatever, should be licence issuers. They should be authorized to issue firearms' licences to all members of their own clubs. In the main, these are very responsible, well run organizations and their members know how to handle guns and how to keep them safely. They can be considered as suitable to issue licences to their own members to own firearms. I submit that this would help relieve some of the administrative load from local police departments and other officials, particularly in large cities. For example, in Regina I suspect that anywhere from 2,000 to 4,000 individuals belong to gun clubs. The licences could be issued by the officers of their own clubs, and I think they should be.

Yesterday the hon. member for Northwest Territories (Mr. Firth) made some excellent points and in the main I agree with him. I suggest to this House and to the government that consideration should be given to exempting the licensing requirements for residents in the northern area of Canada, say north of the fifty-fifth or fifty-sixth parallel.

Mr. Ellis: The sixtieth parallel.

Mr. Benjamin: It needs to be somewhere south of the sixtieth parallel because some of the northern parts of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Labrador should also be exempted from the licensing requirements except in what could be called urban centres, for example, centres with populations in excess of 5,000, such as Yellowknife and Whitehorse. In those places licensing should still be required, but the residents of the rest of the area should be exempt from the licensing provisions. Non-residents such as myself who might go there on a hunting trip should still be required to hold a licence to own firearms. The people in those northern regions know how to handle firearms and for the most part handle them properly. I suspect that the people of the north have a much better safety record than people in the settled parts and in the so-called urbanized parts of Canada. I would feel no hesitation in exempting that part of Canada from the licensing provisions. I support the idea that anyone who is to be given a licence to own firearms should be required to demonstrate fitness to own those firearms. Frankly, I think there should be tests on gun handling and gun safety. One should be able to show some competence in that regard.

Under the provisions of the migratory game birds legislation of the federal government, and provincial laws respecting upland birds and big game, there should be some kind of game identification, hunter safety and courtesy tests for those who wish a licence to own firearms or for those who wish to purchase a licence to hunt.