

The minister came, as someone mentioned earlier, to our committee. Even before he entered the room, he said, "I do not care what amendments they have. I will not change one word of this bill."

That is not how the Parliament of Canada works.

Some Hon. Senators: Oh! Oh!

Senator Lynch-Staunton: There are those here who heard it.

Senator Thériault: That is not what he said.

• (1700)

Senator Lynch-Staunton: The minister's thoughts were well expressed. I will end on that note. He said, when he became justice minister, "I came to Ottawa with the firm belief that the only people in this country who should have guns are police officers and soldiers."

It is with that kind of mindset that Bill C-68 has been conceived. The most dreadful part is that Bill C-68 does not meet his goals. He has yet to restrict weapons, as is his intention, to police officers and soldiers. What restrictions will he conceive of next?

Hon. Joyce Fairbairn (Leader of the Government): Honourable senators, I am pleased to be able to participate in this debate. It is an important debate. I think the contributions that have been made over the past several hours and days have indicated, once again, that when there is an issue of great national importance and emotion, the Senate responds to that issue with eloquence and with great care.

This is an important issue, honourable senators. For the last several years, one of the subjects for which concern has risen steadily among Canadians is that of safety and security — safety in terms of health; security in terms of economics — in private homes and on public streets; in large cities and sprawling urban areas; and in rural towns, villages, and remote communities in the north and south of this country.

This concern, honourable senators, touches every part of our society. It has deep roots in poverty, rapid change, lost opportunities, unemployment, drugs, illiteracy, shifting social values and changing family structures, and all of the manifestations that these combinations produce in terms of anxiety, anger, desperation, crime and violence. It is much more than just statistics, polls, media headlines and sensational trials; it is a public attitude of anxiety which is pushing institutions at all levels to take action, to do something, whether it be through governments, schools, churches, protective services, or the criminal justice system itself.

All of our institutions, honourable senators, are challenged with these demands, and they are challenged in the troubling context of diminished resources all across this land. There are no quick fixes for the problems that have taken root and grown, in

ironic and even tragic parallel with years past of growth and prosperity in Canada.

While longer term efforts to reach the causes must accelerate, right now, attention has focused on strengthening means for protection through the law, through education and through trying to regulate and manage more effectively the tools which, if misused, result in crime, violence and death.

As all of us know, the issue of gun control has become a central feature of this process. It is a controversial issue which defies unanimity, but one on which, as honourable friends opposite have noticed, successive governments have sought and achieved varying degrees of consensus. For the past two years, the current government has tried to find a formula which bridges both protection and fairness. Already, there has been a great deal of consultation — real consultation — debate and compromise.

Bill C-68 is aimed at striking a balance between the legitimate use of firearms by law-abiding citizens of this country — whether they be aboriginal peoples, farmers, ranchers, people who use guns for hunting and recreational purposes, people who are involved in sports competition or who are interested in collecting and preserving guns — and the need to promote public safety and to curtail criminal activity.

There has been a great deal of discussion and debate in the House of Commons, and extensive testimony in its Justice Committee. That led, not to closing the door but to countless amendments and compromises to the original legislation. Here in the Senate, many more witnesses were heard. Senators held meetings across the country, some most recently in days and weeks, but others also throughout the summer, in the areas that they represent. We are now engaged in what may or may not be the final debate on this legislation.

As with all measures designed to strike that balance between competing interests, this legislation has its critics. They are vocal, and they have often been the most vocal in this debate. It is important to remember, however, that these proposals also have a long list of supporters in every part of this country. Often, their voices are not loud and easily heard. They may be members of social services, protective services, or police forces. They may be women and men in fear and distress wherever they live in Canada — urban or rural. They may be victims themselves; they may be families of victims who have been killed or wounded.

I cannot speak today without remembering that it was almost at this time of year in 1989 that 14 families had their daughters killed in a tragic event which took place at l'École polytechnique in Montreal. Some of those families are here with us today. We will not forget that event as a symbol of the other side of the coin in this legislation.

Sometimes, honourable senators, only the strongest come forward to speak. However, the trends of public surveys have shown consistently that a majority of Canadians do support gun control, as my honourable friend the Leader of the Opposition has said; they do support gun control measures, and, honourable senators, they also support this legislation.